



CHAPTER 9

MIDLIFERS AND TEENAGERS

The midlife transition of the parent

Life tasks of the teenager

Adolescent development

Some specific concerns of parents about teenage behaviour

Thinking about a future career

Summing up

MIDLIFERS AND TEENAGERS

It has been said that adolescence comes at an inconvenient time for parents! Though spaced some 20 to 30 years apart, adolescence and midlife have one thing in common: both are transitional phases.

It could be argued that adolescence ends when schooling has been completed or training has begun for adult roles. However, other criteria may also be used to define its end and the beginning of adulthood, for example, at the age of 17 one may apply for a driver's licence, at 18 one may vote, but only at 21 may one marry without parental consent. So one may be considered more 'adult' in some respects than in others.

The lengthening of education has extended the period of adolescence. Burns aptly sums the situation up thus: 'This transition period provides a young person with time to learn and practise social, vocational, political and economics skills for the future; but equally it provides a period of conflict and vacillation between dependence and independence, maturity and immaturity, between self-expectations/values, peer expectations/values, and adult expectations/values' (1986, p 220).

The terms 'teenager' and 'adolescent' will be used synonymously in what follows. This period begins at the age of 13 and ends at 19. Early adolescence lies roughly between 13 to 16 and late adolescence between 17 to 19. This division is, however, rather arbitrary.

Midlife is the transition from early to middle adulthood. It occurs



somewhere between the late thirties and early forties. It is also known as the midlife transition. For many, it is a gradual transition and a period of consolidation and integration. For others it may be a time of crisis and upheaval. Midlife crises may stem from serious problems in the family or at work. Sometimes acute crises may herald a psychological growth spurt because outworn values and lifestyles are questioned and new ones are sought.

Adolescence and midlife do not coincide in all families, for example in some cases the late arrival of children will mean that parents will be well into middle age when their children reach their teens.

THE MIDLIFE TRANSITION OF THE PARENT

What are the kinds of changes which tend to occur when the midlife transition is reached toward the end of the thirties?

- **Reappraisal of oneself.** Taking a new and perhaps critical look at oneself is an important feature of transitional phases. Questions arise, such as: Just who and what am I? Where am I headed? How can I be nearly middle-aged when I feel so young?

In some people these questions may give rise to near panic. Others, like Bill Cosby, of TV fame, may react with wry humour. He remarks on how young people begin to look as we reach the fifties. 'How can you accept a speeding fine from someone who looks as though he is dressed up for the school play? And how can you have your blood pressure taken by someone who looks as though he should be asking you if he can borrow your car?' (1988).

- **Sense of urgency.** Up to this point there may have been a feeling that any changes one wanted to make could wait till later. Now the realisation dawns that time is not unlimited; time is marching on. This may engender a sense of urgency. Decisions that have been put off may suddenly be made.
- **Role change.** Changes in roles occur throughout life. At midlife a man may become a mentor to others at work, or may have to come to terms with the fact that he has reached his ceiling. Some may make dramatic mid-career changes because they themselves, or their jobs, have changed so much that there is no longer a comfortable fit between them. At this time many women develop stronger commitment and career-orientation in regard to their jobs, with definite plans for

advancement. Career change in the middle years has become more frequent and acceptable in recent years.

James was a highly successful partner in a law firm. He had made his mark early in his career because of his ability to find creative solutions to unusual situations. Now, at the age of 43 James found himself a director of a smoothly running law firm – running too smoothly for James. He was bored and dissatisfied and he became convinced that he had made a bad career choice. So he wanted out! He thought he would like to study ancient history and music. However, the financial realities of such a change made him think again and seek advice. From this it eventually became clear to him that he still enjoyed law but that his innovative talent was not being used in his current position. He decided to become a legal consultant in the field of forensic medicine, a relatively new field in which many new challenges and issues had to be dealt with. He also joined a choir and is reading all he can about ancient history. He has found a happy solution to his problem.

- **Relationships change.** Marriage relationships undergo subtle changes over time. By this stage a couple may have settled into a comfortable companionship. Sometimes a stage of boredom with each other is reached. Often a new balance has to be negotiated as the cumulative effect of change in one or both partners has to be adapted to. In some cases divorce may then be considered. However, it is noteworthy that many marriages improve again in the empty nest stage when children have left home. In some couples this is an opportunity to seek new shared interests and common ground.

Learning to live with certain changes in oneself and one's partner requires commitment, patience, tolerance – and humour.

Midlife may be a tranquil period as life experience comes into its own. It may also be complex and turbulent as when major changes occur from within or are caused by external factors such as retrenchment. Successful coping with earlier life-tasks generally makes it easier to cope with those that arise now.

- **Physical change.** Certain physical changes are fairly obvious: stamina for physical exertion, especially of a strenuous kind, decreases and the battle of the bulge may begin. There may be some deterioration in vision and glasses may become a necessity. Baldness may begin to be visible. The way in which such changes are reacted to will largely depend on the meaning and importance attached to them: they may be

devastating to a person whose career depends on youthful good looks, such as a model, but be of little consequence to someone focused on intellectual achievement.

Sexuality may decline somewhat, often for non-physical reasons, such as stress, excessive eating or drinking. More significant may be certain qualitative changes, for example, love-making may become less passionately sexual but more gently sensual.

- **Psychological changes.** Psychological changes may be of a subtle kind. A broader perspective of life may be attained. Being sandwiched between the old and the young, and involved with both, may increase understanding of the total lifespan in a new way. This may also promote self-understanding and tolerance toward oneself, which Gould (1980) sees as the goal of personality development. Self-tolerance means acceptance of all one is – the good, the bad and the indifferent. It does not, however, mean complacency or self-satisfaction for there is always room for improvement. But it frees one from the need to impress others and to seek popularity as a defence against a sense of inadequacy because a more secure sense of self has by now been achieved.

A little understood change may occur in regard to the masculine and feminine dimensions of personality which now may become better integrated within a person. Tendencies which have been suppressed may now be more readily accepted. For example, men may gradually become more accepting of the feminine, that is the gentler and more emotional aspects of themselves. It may no longer be so important to be a 'macho guy'. It can be insightful in this regard to compare a father's toughness with his own sons when they were children and his gentleness with his grandson!

On the other hand, women may become more assertive and independent in the middle years. Clearly, this has implications for the marriage relationship, notably for changes in existing power and authority patterns. Such changes may increase existing incompatibilities, generate new conflict or may draw a couple closer together.

- **Roles in the family may need to be renegotiated.** A couple may now refocus on each other where the tendency may have been to centre their life on the children. Flexibility and the willingness to modify existing patterns is important at this stage: mutual tolerance a great asset.

Johann had grown up in a traditional family. His mother had never been employed and his father had been the strong head of the

household whose authority was never questioned. Susanne, his wife, had a different background. Her parents had a little crafts shop in which they both worked. In her mid-thirties Susanne began to take her hobby of dressmaking more seriously and gradually began to spend more time on making special occasion dresses for her friends, who brought more friends. In a rather unplanned way Susanne suddenly found herself making evening gowns and wedding dresses. Her income equalled that of Johann, whose ego was threatened by this, and who resented the amount of time Susanne was giving to her 'hobby', which had become a successful enterprise. Johann demanded that Susanne give it up. Susanne enjoyed her work enormously and refused to consider this option. After much conflict and a great deal of counselling they reached a compromise. Susanne employed an assistant and so gained more time to share with Johann, who gradually learnt to respect Susanne's talent and the need for her to express it. A new relationship began to emerge. Had they been unwilling to adapt, a total breakdown of the relationship could have been expected.

Parents and teenagers

Parents must adapt not only to changes in themselves but to much more dramatic changes in their children as they reach and move through adolescence. Their children's adolescence and all it implies may come as quite a shock to a parent.

Celeste, a mother in her mid-thirties recalls how stunned she was when walking along the beach she suddenly realised that the wolf whistles were for her teenage daughter and not for her. 'Talk about reality shock! I was 35 and my daughter 14 and *she* was getting the admiring glances. My *child* was being reacted to as a woman. It was a double shock. If I was the mother of a budding woman then who was I? I was really confused, staggered and, fortunately, also amused. My female ego was dented but my mother's heart filled with pride – my daughter was a lovely girl. Pride next made way for anxiety as I realised the vulnerability of my daughter – she was still so innocent about the ways of the world. This mixed bag of feelings I carried around with me for a long time.'



Comments by some teenagers also reflect their confusion. Susan, a sixteen year old, says: 'One minute I'm told to be more responsible, the next minute I'm reminded that I'm still a child. So who is mixed up?'

Tom at eighteen says: 'Why can't I have my dad's car to take my friends to a party when he's not using it? And why can't my mom sleep till I am at home? I mean, I'm not a baby anymore.'

'My dad won't let me drive his car – but I teach him how to use his computer!'

'I wish my parents would say what's on their mind. Why do they say I can't go camping with Derek and his friends because the weather is too cold, or I am too young when what they really mean is that they are scared I'm going to sleep with Tom.' This comment by Ursula aptly reveals how teenagers and parents may sense hidden meanings behind what is said. But both may find it difficult to deal with delicate and difficult topics and so tend to pussyfoot around them. This is understandable but is not generally helpful when it comes to finding solutions.

These comments reveal the uncertainties and mixed feelings which parents and their teenagers need to cope with. Good communication is especially important at this stage.

In traditional societies there were specific rites which marked the transition from childhood to adulthood: the initiation ceremonies served this purpose. For example, a Xhosa youth underwent the ritual of circumcision between the ages of 17 and 21 which marked a clear turning point from child to adult. Circumcision is followed by a period of seclusion when instruction is given on what is socially appropriate adult behaviour, such as settling disputes, not by sticks as children do, but by law. Many symbolic acts, such as the removal of old clothes and the burning of the blanket worn during the period of seclusion clearly signal the end of one stage and the beginning of another (Mwamwenda, 1989).

In technologically advanced societies, where education is spread over many more years, we lack such marker events which clearly prescribe what is expected of all concerned. Instead we find considerable uncertainty about the privileges, responsibilities and roles of adolescents. In particular the question of their freedom and independence is a thorny one.

Several notable changes in **parent-child interaction** occur as children grow up. They may take place over a period of years.

- Authority patterns change as teenagers strive toward greater independence. The style of parental authority may also have to be reconsidered, with a greater emphasis placed on negotiation.
- Privacy. The teenager's need for privacy increases. It is not always a simple matter for a parent to decide between respect for a teenager's privacy and the need to know what a teenager may be involved with.
- Responsibility. As the teenager's demands for freedom increase, so the need to take responsibility should also increase. These two developments do not always occur in tandem, causing considerable concern to parents and frustration in their children.
- Different views. As the ability to think more critically and independently develops, parents may find their views challenged.
- Both the midlife parent and his or her teenager may experience identity crises, greatly complicating their interaction. Both may be questioning their identity, learning to cope with a new body-image and changing sexuality.
- Emotional realignments are made as teenagers become emotionally less dependent on parents and more involved with friends and fall in love.



Some of the uncertainties and ambiguities of parent-teenager interaction can be gleaned from the following remarks.

'Pat shows no consideration for others – she just thinks of herself. She's becoming a thoroughly self-centred person.'

'Trevor is such a know-all, he's a real pain.'

'Mary thinks she can change the world. I appreciate her idealism but worry that she will go through life bumping her head against walls of opposition.'

'Jeremy will never settle down, every few weeks he's into something new.'

Such remarks reflect parental concerns about some of the more exaggerated reactions they may be witnessing in their teenagers, particularly if they view them as permanent. In most cases they are transient, heralding new developments which may be expressed with more enthusiasm than subtlety at this stage.

LIFE TASKS OF THE TEENAGER

Just as parents face particular life tasks, so do teenagers. In brief, these are:

- Coming to terms with a changing body which is not only taller and stronger but different, and it is also sexual.
- Developing a sense of identity, thus seeking answers to questions such as 'Who am I?' and 'What am I?'
- Achieving more independence from parents.
- Defining certain life goals in regard to education and a future work role.
- Developing personal insights and ideas in preparation for making choices relating to various issues.
- Developing more mature relationships with peers of both sexes.
- Preparing for socially responsible relationships which are the fore-runners of marriage and family life.
- Defining basic values concerning what is right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, that is to develop a personal morality and belief system.

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

A different body

The most obvious physical change in adolescence is a tremendous growth spurt. A boy's height may increase by as much as 20 per cent. The teenager has to adapt not only to a bigger and taller body but to a different one. Not all aspects of physical development occur in a balanced way and so often cause a certain lack of symmetry: we notice this in the gangliness of some and the podginess of others. As adolescence progresses, so balance is restored. However, the early changes are demanding physically and psychologically, and it is not surprising to find early adolescence to be associated with fatigue and erratic energy patterns.

Sexual maturation occurs as a result of hormonal changes. It is this

new sexual body that the adolescent has to adapt to. Much of the uncertainty of teenagers relates to how to deal with this. A teenager may be sexually mature in purely functional terms: both boys and girls may be able to have sexual intercourse and are fertile. This does not mean that they are ready for the consequences of sexual behaviour.

There are wide variations in the onset of puberty which usually occurs earlier in girls than boys. Early or late puberty affects boys and girls differently. For boys, early maturity and the associated taller and stronger body is linked to strength and masculinity and can be a source of self-confidence and approval by others. For girls, it tends to be less of an advantage, in fact it may be a disadvantage since she looks the woman but is not yet ready for the responses she elicits from older boys and men. It is noteworthy that the age of puberty is dropping, girls are having their first menstruation earlier, thus widening the gap between physical and psychological maturity. This is attributed to better nutrition and health care.

Thinking changes

Only a few general features of adolescent thinking are highlighted.

- The adolescent's **knowledge base increases** because of the effect of years of schooling and contact with more sources of information. There is also an increasing ability to understand the connection between different pieces of information. The adolescent is also able to concentrate for longer periods of time. The ability to evaluate information is linked to becoming more critical of oneself, one's parents and the world in general.
- The **ability to think in abstract terms** increases, which means the adolescent is able to think not only in terms of what is, but also what is possible. This is often associated with a new kind of idealism. This is most noticeable in later adolescence when teenagers may become involved in humanitarian or political causes and may go to extremes in their youthful idealism.
- There is an **egocentricity in the adolescent's thinking** in the sense of being centred on the self – not to be confused with selfishness. This is because of the belief that THEIR way of seeing things is the best way. This is linked to two notions: that of the 'imaginary audience' and of the 'personal fable' (Elkind, 1967).

All of us sometimes react to an **imaginary audience**, as when we mentally rehearse a situation, be it for an interview with a boss, raising a point at a meeting or dealing with a difficult family situation. We picture it in our minds and imagine how 'we' and 'they' will react. The adolescent does much of this kind of imaginary rehearsing, which is a kind of practice for situations and interactions with people. At the centre of the imaginary audience is the self and the notion that others are as strongly focused on it as the teenager is.

Thirteen-year-old Anita was extremely embarrassed about her mother's car, which was old and dented and lacked the style she associated with her friends' parents' BMWs. If school had not been so far away, Anita would rather have walked to school than be seen in this vehicle. She felt that everybody was staring at the car and she would try to hide on the floor of the car if she saw any of her friends on the way home. She was convinced that her social life would surely be ruined if anyone had to associate her with THAT car!

This example highlights the teenager's notion of being the centre of the stage and that the reactions of others will be the same as their own. This tendency is particularly strong in early adolescence.

Another dimension of this self-centredness is the '**personal fable**'. This is a fantasy in which the adolescent occupies a central place, for example as hero or heroine, be it as super popstar, missionary to the distressed, or whatever. This sense of being special also seems to give rise to an exaggerated sense of being invincible or invulnerable. It is expressed in themes such as 'nothing will happen to me', 'I won't have an accident', 'I won't fall pregnant', which partly explains why teenagers may take risks which parents find hair raising.

Taken together, there may be a tendency to be overcritical of others and of things not to the teenager's liking, and to be undercritical concerning the feasibility of their own ideas. Under these circumstances, parents can be helpful if they:

- avoid sarcasm and excessive criticism
- retain a sense of humour without poking fun at their child's ideas and idealism
- are patient, knowing that this stage will usually pass
- stand firm in regard to their own values and ideas
- are willing to listen to their teenager's views and keep the channels of communication open

- are prepared to negotiate, but not to abdicate their role as parents
- give encouragement, praise and credit for trying, even if something is unsuccessful
- help their children to evaluate themselves realistically
- concentrate on the talents and strengths of their teenagers rather than on their limitations
- use their teenager's emerging critical ability to see possible alternative courses of action and to consider the consequences of different courses of action
- are honest, instead of defensive, about their own shortcomings, about which one's adolescent offspring may be uncomfortably perceptive
- recognise the validity of viewpoints which may differ from their own.



POINT TO PONDER

'The best brought up children are those who have seen their parents as they are. Hypocrisy is not the parent's first duty' (George Bernard Shaw).

EXERCISE

Can you recall situations when you were an adolescent, when you felt your parents did not understand you or when they embarrassed you in some way or other? Are there any similarities between this and any of your teenager's reactions?

Behaving morally

Closely allied to the higher levels of thinking which now emerge in the teenager is the increasing ability to make independent moral judgements. This involves certain steps.

- In the first place the teenager must recognise that there is a moral problem. For example, John knows that his friend, Basil, is throwing wild parties while his parents are away and that some drugs and alcohol are being freely taken. This is putting some of his friends at risk for doing things they would not normally do. John is really concerned about this.
- John decides that something ought to be done. He has spent hours thinking that something should be done to stop this situation from possibly becoming harmful in one way or another.
- John has to decide in terms of his conscience and values what action to take. This is often the most difficult part because John may be torn between loyalty to his friends and concern for them. Taking appropriate action may mean getting his friends into trouble with their parents.
- Finally, he makes the decision to speak to Basil himself and to warn other friends about what is going on. Hardest of all, if this fails he will seek the advice of a counsellor or, worst of all, talk to Basil's parents, which would mean the end of their friendship.

Whatever the moral judgement and action taken in response to a situation such as that faced by John it will have its roots in earlier development and particularly in the example shown by parents and other significant people and in the values that have been instilled.

In a nutshell, it is during the teenage years that moral behaviour begins moving towards a sense of responsibility towards others. There tends to be a difference between males and females concerning where the emphasis is placed. Females may place the emphasis on realities and interpersonal relations, for example, considering 'What is good for someone else', or 'What is best for me and you'. Answers to these questions may then influence the action taken. In the case of males the concern may be focused on group interaction such as 'being a good team mate'.

Moving towards moral responsibility is complicated by certain contradictions inherent in Western culture itself. Many years ago Horney (1951) pointed out three major contradictions in our culture which seem even more relevant today:

- The constant stimulation of our needs and our inability to satisfy them. Just consider the numerous products and exciting holiday destinations advertised – yet within reach of so few.

- The contradiction between the values of brotherly love and the demands of the marketplace and its emphasis on rivalry and competition.
- The conflict between our alleged freedom and the innumerable restrictions placed upon it. Here one need only consider how many rules of the road must be observed on the drive from home to work.



POINT TO PONDER

‘Everything that frees our spirit without giving us control of ourselves is ruinous’ (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe).

This is me!

Our self-image relates to: what I think I am; what I am capable of; what others think of me; what I would like to be (ideal self-concept), and how I rate myself (self-esteem).

This circle represents the different aspects of a person’s self-image.

- The *physical* self which refers to one’s view of one’s health, appearance, sexuality, energy, stamina, etc.
- The *social* self which refers to how one sees oneself socially: as outgoing, shy, popular, friendly, extrovert or introvert.
- The *intellectual* self which refers to one’s talents and abilities, for example being good at maths but hopeless at drawing.
- The *emotional* self: perceiving oneself as cool and calm, or emotional, moody, basically joyful, easily hurt, anxious, etc.
- The *moral* self. This refers to what kind of moral person I think I am, what my ethics are. Religious faith is often the foundation of one’s moral judgements.



Statements or thoughts such as 'I am not as hardworking as I ought to be' or 'Why can't I be as nice as my best friend?' are self-evaluative remarks that indicate a person's **self-esteem**. Some discrepancy between one's real self and what one should ideally be is common at any age. However, if the discrepancy is too wide this can lead to serious dissatisfaction with oneself. On the other hand, if there is no difference at all this could indicate smugness and a denial of any shortcomings.

There is also a dark side to self-esteem and this we sometimes see in people or leaders who have an inflated sense of self, who are arrogant, brook no opposition and may react in extreme ways when thwarted, challenged or threatened. Often their entire self-image is centred on one aspect thereof, for example being a gang leader, the school's rugby star, a fine drummer or a national hero. This may explain their extreme reaction, often in the form of aggression, to any threat to their position because all their self-esteem is linked only to this (Baumeister *et al*, 1996).

This is my place and future role

Our sense of self and identity are closely interwoven. Identity relates to one's place in the community. This is reflected in statements such as: 'I am a Grade 8 pupil', 'I play tennis for the second team', 'I'm the eldest daughter', 'I'm a Muslim.'

It is during adolescence that a person's identity begins to be more consciously formulated. It has direct implications for the roles the teenager will ultimately fill as an adult. Erikson (1963) sees the development of a clear identity as the primary task of adolescence because it links so closely with a person's later commitments. It is usually during late adolescence or early adulthood that a sense of identity is achieved.

The development of a person's identity does not always proceed smoothly. Some adolescents may lack a sense of direction and commitment. This may especially be the case in early adolescence.

In some cases a role and identity may be prescribed by tradition as when



a social position is inherited. Another example would be when a son is expected to follow in his father's footsteps by joining the family business, even though he may lack the particular talents or skills this may require.

Many adolescents **explore several roles** and alternatives with considerable enthusiasm for limited periods of time before making final choices. Then there are adolescents who set themselves certain goals and pursue them with commitment. In other words, they have made certain vocational, political, or interpersonal choices. They have a clear sense of their identity. Others may find it difficult to find direction, or simply need more time.

An individual's self-image and identity show considerable consistency over time. However, they may have to be reassessed and changed when circumstances change, new challenges must be confronted or new insights are gained.

Erikson (1963) believes that an individual's sense of identity must be firmly established before there is a readiness for true intimacy with others. Intimacy may seem a threat to someone with an uncertain identity.

Alternatively, someone with an unformulated identity may over-identify with someone else, be it a lover, friend or gang leader.

Gender identity

Developing a clear sense of one's masculinity or femininity, that is one's gender identity, is an important aspect of psychological development.

EXERCISE

- 1 What psychological characteristics do you regard as typical for males?
 - 2 What psychological characteristics do you regard as typical for females?
 - 3 Can you think of a person you know, or a character in a book or on screen, with both qualities? (Why not make this a family game, letting each person first draw up a list of his or her own, then compare and discuss them.)
 - 4 Do you and other members of the family hold similar or different views?
 - 5 What have you learnt from this exercise?
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Nowadays, there is greater flexibility concerning gender identity. This has important implications for vocational choice: a hundred years ago, a female doctor was almost unknown. And what man would possibly have wanted to be a florist?

As during earlier stages, the father can be especially helpful in regard to the development of gender identity of his teenage children. For example, a father can affirm the emerging womanhood of his daughter by treating her with courtesy and striking a balance between protectiveness and respect for her growing independence and by showing appreciation for her achievements of whatever kind. If such affirmation is lacking, she may seek it elsewhere, for example in early involvement with older men. A father's approval of his son's masculinity is equally important. He should acknowledge his son's need for greater independence yet remain interested in and supportive of his activities. There seems to be a connection between a lack of fathering and excessive aggressiveness in male teenagers, as if they were trying just too hard to show their toughness which they see as synonymous with masculinity.

It needs to be emphasised that gender identity is an aspect of personality. So it is possible for a female to be strong in masculine characteristics and vice versa. This should not be confused with homosexuality, which relates to preferences of sexual partner.

SOME SPECIFIC CONCERNS OF PARENTS ABOUT TEENAGE BEHAVIOUR

The aggressive teenager

There is a disturbingly high incidence of aggression and violence among the youth of this country. Various factors have been associated with this. In disadvantaged groups, it is related to a culture of poverty, unemployment, exacerbated by the wide economic gap between the poor and the affluent, possibly leading to envy and jealousy. Disrupted family life is a common feature and active family support may be lacking in times of crisis. The rage and violence of youth stemming from this background may express itself in destructiveness and crime (Le Roux & Geldenhuys, 1994).

Speaking at the launch of the Democracy Education Conference in Pretoria in 1997, Graca Machel appealed to leaders and parents to promote a culture of respect among the youth. 'Whatever was the legitimacy of the

armed struggle ... we have the responsibility of bringing up a generation of young people who believe that to achieve something they must use violence.' She went on to say: 'Our children do not know how to solve a problem without resorting to violence and they believe that human life has no value We must work towards a reaffirmation of a set of values that is free from recourse to violence and racism' (*Pretoria News*, 12 May 1997). To this, I would add freedom from sexism, because the disturbingly high incidence of rape stems from a lack of respect for and aggression towards women.



However, teenage aggression is not limited to any particular ethnic or socio-economic group. It is to be found in all strata of society if a sufficient number of factors which promote it are present.

The youth of South Africa need a positive vision of the future. Among the black youth this means a shift from an identity of protest to an identity of reconstruction (Freeman, 1994); among the white youth a shift to an identity of reconstruction in a new social order.

The energy of youth needs to be canalised constructively to give purpose to life and value to the individual.

In a country with such a high incidence of aggression, we should try to limit aggressive cues that stimulate aggression in those inclined towards it. Such cues could take the form of slogans, scenes of violence on TV, incitements by political leaders, or the visible presence of weapons.

Factors linked to aggression

Aggression incorporates anger, hostility and the desire to hurt or damage. Certain factors have consistently been linked to aggressive behaviour, namely personality, family life, socio-cultural context and personal life history. Briefly they are:

- **Personality:** Distrust, poor self-image or inflated self-esteem tied to aggressive behaviour; feelings of anger, hurt, fear, frustration, alienation and aggressiveness; a lack of social skills.
- **Family:** Lack of warmth and love; conflict in the home; limited coping

skills; absent or uninterested fathers; uncertain values; ineffective role models and little support in times of stress.

- **Context:** Poverty and overcrowding; uncertain values; high visibility of violence; poor support services; aggressive role models.
- **Life history:** Many family disruptions; unsettledness and uprootedness; exposure to trauma and violence; peer pressure, poor education; unrealistic achievement expectations.

This list highlights the numerous factors which might be involved in the development of aggressive behaviour. If we wish to reduce aggressive behaviour, we need to address as many of these factors as possible, and to demonstrate and reward alternative and co-operative responses.

Counteracting aggression

The following points need to be taken into account when trying to counteract aggressive behaviour. There should be exposure to and interaction with non-aggressive role models. Training in social skills can also often reduce aggressiveness because individuals may react with aggression because they have no other skills to use in situations of conflict. Learning to communicate better and to be assertive instead of aggressive is also helpful. Lacking negotiating skills and not knowing how to deal with criticism is another problem. Social skills training should focus on all such aspects in addition to also trying to develop more empathic responses.

One such skills programme was undertaken with highly aggressive adolescents in their last year at primary school. They were taught social skills in small groups. They were shown appropriate videotapes, played games, and read about children who coped successfully or unsuccessfully with problems. At the end of the programme a marked improvement in their behaviour was noted by other children and teachers (Bienert & Schneider, 1993).

Pro-social behaviour

There are many adolescents and young people who are highly responsible and whose behaviour is mostly co-operative. Coupled with the idealism of youth, they are a powerful force for innovation and constructive change. The following tend to be associated with pro-social behaviour, that is,

caring, sharing and helping. Again we find several factors allied to this kind of behaviour.

- **Personality:** Trust in others and optimism; positive self-image and good self-esteem; a sense of competence; social skills: helpful and friendly, assertive, co-operative.
- **Family:** Co-operative and warm; involved and interested; good communication; clear standards and values; good example; support in times of crisis; problem-solving skills; having fun together.
- **Context:** Stability maintained in spite of cultural conflicts; involvement with constructive groups, eg sport; reasonably comfortable living conditions; non-participation in violence, even if affected by it; adequate sources of support, for example at school
- **Life history:** Continuity and stability; good education; reasonable expectations of achievement; effective role models; exposure to helping behaviour.

The two extreme scenarios of aggressive and pro-social behaviour serve to show how many factors are involved. In neither scenario is it suggested that all factors need to be present. They merely reflect what factors have been associated with these contrasting forms of behaviour. Looking at the factors associated with pro-social behaviour, one is able to deduce what kind of action could be taken to counter aggression and encourage responsible social behaviour.

Friends for better or worse

Adolescents are generally drawn strongly to their peers, for example by



being a member of a group, a sports team, a clique of friends, a club, a gang. In early adolescence groups of the same sex are preferred. This gradually changes to participation in groups comprised of both sexes, still later this pattern changes and there may be closer involvement in couples, loosely associated with groups.

Friends and groups are an important form of support for adolescents as they try to become more independent from parental control, yet still lack experience and skill in coping with the outside world. Friends also play a part in the development of the adolescent's identity as different behaviour patterns are tried out in the group. It also should be recognised that a teenager's popularity in the group is an important source of self-esteem.

Parents and friends

It is not unusual for friends of teenagers and their social activities to be a source of worry for parents and a source of conflict between them and their children. Children may resent what they see as parental interference and restrictiveness whereas parents may be concerned about protecting the teenagers against the many risks to which they may be exposed in today's world. Parents may deal with the situation in a variety of ways. They may be authoritarian and rigid, and impose very strict limits. At the other extreme they may be very permissive and define no boundaries of behaviour. Many parents fall somewhere between these two extremes, allowing increasing independence, yet not being afraid to make certain rules and ensuring that they are complied with.

I am reminded of the story of a parent asked to referee a football match between two schools because the referee had not arrived. Valiantly trying to do so, he discovered to his horror that the teams wore similar uniforms and he could not sort out who belonged to which team. Moreover, the rules had changed since the days when he had played football. Not surprisingly, his decisions were not accepted and argument, chaos and fights resulted. Fortunately, the referee arrived in time to avert a major confrontation. The point of this story is that without clearly agreed upon ground rules, much argument, frustration, uncertainty and even aggression may occur, not only on the sports field but also in the home!

EXERCISE

Setting limits

How strict or lenient would you be with regard to setting limits concerning matters such as:

	Strict	Lenient	Moderate
Hairstyle			
Curfew			
Helping at home			
Homework			
Clothes			
Tidiness			
Politeness			
Spending pocket money			
Watching TV			
Smoking			
Drinking			
Using family car (after age 18)			
Other			

- How would this differ according to the age and gender of your teenager?

At what age would you permit your children to:

	Son	Daughter
Go out at night:		
● with a group of same-sex friends		
● with a mixed group of friends		
● as a couple		
Go on holiday with:		
● a group of same-sex friends		
● a mixed group		
● friends of the opposite sex		
Go to a party without adult supervision:		
● at a friend's house		
● at a public place		

*Do you ever discuss these rules with the parents of your children's friends? Would it not be helpful to do so?

Parents and their children's sexuality

One of the particularly difficult situations parents have to face relates to the emerging sexuality of their teenage child.

For centuries most cultures and religions have disapproved of premarital sex. Even during the first part of this century, the prevailing norm in Western countries was to defer sexual intercourse until marriage. To ensure this, a great deal of parental control and chaperonage was exercised. Young teenagers met only in public places, usually in a group under the supervision of adults. Curfews were strict and couples generally only went out alone once there was a real commitment to marriage, as when they were engaged. However, there was also a different sexual morality for males and females. It was considered acceptable for males to 'sow their wild oats' before marriage, usually with women considered to have loose morals. But women were expected to be chaste.

In the sixties the so-called sexual revolution began, leading to increasingly permissive attitudes towards premarital sex. Today there may be considerable discrepancy between religious and parental values and those of their teenagers and their friends. Many young people today believe that sexual activity is acceptable, provided a couple are genuinely in love. A feature of this new morality is the great increase in the number of teenage girls and young women who are sexually active. A particularly worrying phenomenon is that the age at which sexual behaviour begins has been dropping steadily. A serious consequence of these changes has been a dramatic increase in teenage pregnancy, which has even been referred to as an epidemic. It is estimated that about one million teenage pregnancies occur in the United States of America annually. In South Africa it is estimated that 11 per cent of all babies are born to teenage mothers. These are alarming figures (De Barros, 1990).

To deal with all the factors involved in teenage pregnancies would fill a book. Janet's story encompasses many of them. Janet is 16 years old

and four and a half months pregnant. 'I just can't believe this has happened. I only had sex twice. Now I just don't know what to do. I'm going to have to leave school because my mom is a single parent and has to work ... and I had such special plans – I really wanted to do something with my life – now I just don't know. I do well at school, so I think I may be able to stay on, but I don't really feel like it. I'm different from the other girls now. I mean, it just doesn't seem important to talk about wearing my hair up or down and their worrying about their pimples ... I wish that was my biggest worry. And (starting to cry) Jake (the father of the expected baby) is at the same school as me, and he just runs away when he sees me now. I just hate him.'

A child bearing a child. Instead of her resources being used for her own development, she is being physically and psychologically drained. There are certain risks attached to teenage pregnancy and the younger the mother, the more they apply.

- Both mothers and babies are physically more vulnerable, for example babies born to very young mothers tend to have lower birth weight.
- An unwanted child may become a rejected child.
- A teenage mother's schooling and training are at best interrupted, at worst, ended.
- The development of the self-image and identity is deflected from its normal course of development: she is a mother before she really knows who she herself is.

Although social attitudes are changing and there is less rejection of unwed mothers, there may still be disapproval by peers and parents, who react with disappointment, withdrawal and anger.

Teenage pregnancy may lead to early marriage, for which neither partner may be emotionally, intellectually or economically ready.

Abortion

Now that the new abortion act has been promulgated, it may be argued that this is the answer to teenage pregnancy. However, the matter is not that simple. Many people have serious religious and other objections about

abortion. It also needs to be recognised that teenage pregnancy may be associated with a period of denial due to shock such as thinking: 'it can't have happened to me' or 'it will go away if I ignore it'. The consequence of this is that by the time the pregnancy is admitted, it may be too late for an abortion, or associated with much higher risk.



POINT TO PONDER

It has been said that the thorny question for parents is whether they should encourage chastity or the use of contraception? What do you think about it?

Teenage sex is most often unprotected sex, especially in the early years, and therefore the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including Aids, is another cause for concern. The highest incidence of Aids in South Africa is in the 16 to 24 years age group.

So what can parents do?

At the outset it must be recognised that parents have a difficult task. They live in a society which encourages sexual openness and where the media provide endless stimulation of sexual needs, but little protection is offered by society to young people with raging hormones.

There is no simple answer to the question 'So what should parents do?'. And many parents, because of embarrassment, or lack of knowledge, do little or nothing about sex education. The problem often lies not so much with transmitting the basic facts about reproduction as with talking about the values and acceptable behaviour associated with sex. Parents who are able to discuss sexual behaviour openly and honestly with their children are the exception rather than the rule. Parents who have been able to communicate openly with their children from early childhood onwards may find this less of a problem.

- 1 Do you think that attitudes of your generation towards sex and sexual behaviour differ from those of today's youth?
- 2 In what ways do you think they differ?
- 3 What worries you most about these changes?
- 4 Do you think that some changes are for the better?

Having said that sex education is not generally one of the areas of greatest parental skill, it must be admitted that this is not a topic to be avoided: the contrary is true.

Apart from teaching the basic facts of sexual development and reproduction parents must encourage an attitude of concern and advocate responsible sexual behaviour.

So what parents can do is:

- **Be an example** of what they profess. This means being an example by means of the attitudes and behaviour towards each other as a couple.

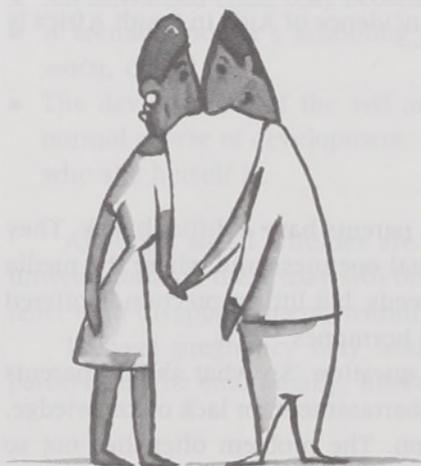
More specifically, there should be mutual respect, love and affection.

- **Ensure that their values and beliefs are clear and reflected in behaviour towards others.**

If parents are seen to be inconsiderate towards others, to manipulate and exploit them for their personal gain, then their arguments about responsibility towards others will lack credibility.

- **See to it that their children are correctly informed about sexual behaviour and development.**

Providing appropriate books or other reading material could be one way of doing this. It would be important to check the approach adopted in such sources of information: an approach which does little more than deal with the gymnastics of sex would hardly be suitable.



- **Find out about life skills and sex education programmes being offered in your area.** If the school your child attends is offering such courses find out about their content and who is presenting them and if the person has been trained to conduct such courses. An ill-at-ease biology teacher talking about the birds and the bees is not adequate! (See chapter notes at end for information.)
- **Use the opportunities provided** by features or stories in newspapers, magazines or on screen to raise relevant issues and to talk about them.
- **Be patient.** Bear in mind that there may be genuine idealism at the heart of the notions a teenager holds. Introduce a note of realism but be careful not to destroy dreams.
- **Do not expect your views to be accepted.** Youth has always rebelled against the opinions and ways of their elders. Nonetheless it is the parent's responsibility to counter ignorance, to raise issues and to suggest different alternatives and discuss their possible consequences.
- **Do not assume that today's youth has no morality of its own.** Today's youth tends to stress respect for the individual, regardless of religion, race or sex, honesty in interpersonal relationships and an awareness of social responsibility.
- **Protect your children against exposure to high-risk situations,** especially during early adolescence. Co-operation with other parents might be useful in establishing certain ground rules.

Adolescent sexuality

What males need to know about females

- Females are often more emotionally involved than males.
- It is often because of a desire to please the male that a girl submits to sex, not because she herself wants it.
- It is often the romantic, emotional side of love which is her primary focus.
- The emotional tie is not easily broken.
- She dresses to invite male attention, not necessarily to invite sex.
- She may be more sensual than sexual, wanting tenderness and caresses.
- The peak of sexuality is later for females than males.
- The consequences of sex, especially unprotected sex, can be very serious

for young females, particularly those resulting from an unwanted pregnancy.

What females need to know about males

- Males can be more casual about sex: the sense of conquest and the hunt can be important to them.
- The male's reaction tends to be genital rather than sensual and it is the climax, the goal, rather than the process which may be important.
- Physical attractiveness is very important to the male and he may find visual cues sexually arousing.
- The male more readily separates emotional and sexual involvement.
- Males reach the peak of their sexuality in their teens.
- Males reach the peak of their sexual arousal more quickly than females.
- The desire to impress others may be an important aspect of male sexuality. (Compare the image of the 'macho sexual conqueror' with that of the 'easy to get' girl or woman.)
- Society judges male and female sexual promiscuity differently.
- The consequences of unprotected sex and subsequent pregnancies are generally less serious for males than females. They do not lose reputation to the same extent, nor do they have their schooling interrupted by unwanted pregnancies.

EXERCISE

- What is responsible or irresponsible sex?

Can you discuss this question with your teenager, bearing the above information in mind?

Alternatively, you could imagine you are taking part in a TV discussion programme. Perhaps a group of teenagers and parents or a teacher, or a group of parents could take part in this discussion. Choose a neutral chairperson who sees to it that everyone has a chance to state his or her case without carrying on endlessly. The chairperson should have read the relevant section in this book and should be able to ask relevant questions. Set a definite time limit for the discussion. Let the

- chairperson sum up the discussion at the end. Then go on to the next question.
 - What can be done to ensure that opinions are translated into behaviour?
Follow the same procedure as for the first question.
 - What have you learnt from seeking answers to these questions?
 - How can this help you talk to your teenager about responsible sex?
-

When do I know I'm in love?

It would be nice if there was a simple answer to this question, which is asked by most people at some stage in their lives, beginning as teenagers. Much has been written and said about love. Sternberg (1986) identified three components of love, which may be present in different combinations.

- **Passion.** This is physical attraction, romance, sexual excitement and longing for the beloved. It may be instant and intense and may die just as quickly. Passion alone can be equated to infatuation.
- **Intimacy.** This is a sense of closeness because feelings, ideas, possessions and interests are shared. One likes this other person and enjoys being with him or her. Intimacy may take time to develop, or be the source of attraction. Intimacy alone means liking and friendship.
- **Commitment.** Commitment is a deliberate decision to nurture and maintain the love one feels for another. Commitment alone could be emotionally empty.

Ideally, all three dimensions should be present. However, they may vary over time in their predominance. Passion may precede or follow intimacy. Intimacy may lead to commitment and so on It is possible that two people are in love, yet the nature of their love may differ: for one it may be mainly passion, and for the other it may consist essentially of intimacy and commitment. A situation which is best avoided is one in which intense passion is felt for a person one actually does not like, fears or distrusts. An idealistic teenager may believe that love can change the other person to become more 'likeable', for example to stop their aggressiveness, to change their drinking habits or stop their philandering.

A reality to be faced is that one can only change oneself and not another person.

What kind of situations do you think the following combinations may lead to in the case of young people?

- 1 He feels passion
She feels intimacy and commitment
- 2 She feels commitment
He feels intimacy and commitment
- 3 He feels passion and intimacy
She feels passion and intimacy

There are, of course, several other combinations one could consider.

So while there is no simple answer to the question, 'When do I know I'm in love?', it could be helpful to know which component dominates one's love.

Don't do drugs!

The phrase 'Don't do crime' is flashed across our TV screens at regular intervals. It does not suggest that a little bit of crime is OK — and that one should just avoid big crime. The message is clear: no crime is OK. Small crime often leads to big crime. It is the same with drugs. **Don't do drugs.**

There are no 'safe' drugs. People may be misled because there are no immediate visible effects. Because the effects may be 'lekker' this also leads to denial of possible ill-effects. The long-term effects are rarely known at the outset and no one ever plans to become an addict. Yet if a person has a predisposition to mental disturbance, this may be triggered quite suddenly by drug taking.

Then there is always the risk of becoming psychologically dependent, needing a drug whenever feeling low. This escapism then stands in the way of learning to cope with and to enjoy life without drugs, for example by overcoming shyness or lack of confidence. Some drugs, including dagga, have a demotivating effect.

A serious source of concern is the increasing use of drugs among children and especially adolescents. Certain signs should alert a parent to the possibility that a child is using drugs:

- very sudden mood swings (bearing in mind that mood swings are very common in teenagers, especially younger teenagers)
- secretiveness, deception and lying, notably in a child not formerly inclined to behave in this way
- a chronic need for money and unexplained losses of money
- altered sleeping patterns
- lethargy and drowsiness or hyperactivity
- irritability which may culminate in aggressiveness
- change in personality, which is not to be confused with normal developmental changes, but rather a case of being really different
- loss of interest in school work, hobbies and friends
- a general vagueness
- neglect of appearance and 'way out' clothing

A combination of these signs could alert a parent to the possibility of drug use. (Information could be obtained from SANCA and other organisations – refer to chapter notes at end of the book.)

At a recent police forum in the Centurion area, it was emphasised that when parents wish to confront their children when they suspect drug abuse they should first get their facts and evidence together which should then be presented firmly and matter-of-factly. A general question such as: 'Are you on drugs?' is too easily met with denial.

At the same forum, a social worker who is directly involved with drug addiction among teenagers in a rehabilitation centre listed seven factors which were brought to light in answer to the question: 'Why are you on drugs?' In order of importance, the following factors were mentioned:

- Drugs are so easily available
- Demands by society are too high and confusing
- Double standards: if drink is OK, why not drugs?
- Because of needing peer approval
- Curiosity: what is it like to be high?
- The excitement of forbidden fruit
- The influence, but not pressure, of peers

THINKING ABOUT A FUTURE CAREER

The question of choosing a career becomes more urgent in late adolescence as schooling nears its end.

Many years ago, Holland (1956) identified certain personal orientations and preferences which affect career choice which are still useful to this day. Briefly, these orientations can be summed up as follows:

- **The physical/realistic orientation.** A person of this orientation tends to enjoy physical action. It may involve physical strength, co-ordination and manual skills. It often relates to outdoor activities such as sport and recreation, construction activities or gardening. Physical robustness may be necessary.
- **The intellectual/searching orientation.** People of this orientation like to analyse and think things through. There is a strong need to understand and organise knowledge and information. This kind of approach would suit a business analyst, an academic or a researcher. A high educational level is necessary.
- **The supportive or social orientation.** This embodies a strong interest in people, often in a helping or serving capacity, for example as in teaching, social or health services. Good interpersonal skills are important.
- **The conforming/conventional orientation.** This is characteristic of people who like structure and order. They often prefer to work with numbers and systems rather than people. They also tend to strongly identify with power, status and external symbols. People who fit into this category would include administrators, accountants, bankers, etc.
- **The persuasive/enterprising orientation.** Such people are often able to express themselves well and use their ability to influence and persuade others. They tend to avoid rigidly structured situations and enjoy power, status, leadership and social activities. They are often found in sales, politics and management.
- **The artistic/creative orientation.** Individuals with this orientation tend to be non-conforming and dislike highly structured activities. They comprise journalists, artists, musicians and so on. They enjoy freedom of expression, novelty and creativity.
- **The religious orientation.** This is linked to a role in one's spiritual belief system for example as priest, theologian or religious counsellor.

Of course it is possible to have more than one orientation. This can be an advantage in that it broadens one's range of options and adds diversity to life. It may also be a source of difficulty, as when trying to find a job or career which satisfies both orientations equally well. In such cases it may

be possible to focus on one orientation in regard to work and to satisfy the other by means of related interests and hobbies.

EXERCISE

If your teenager is not at all certain about which orientation applies, the following exercise might be helpful. It should be completed by your son or daughter personally and could then form the basis of a discussion with them.

Decide which one or two of the above orientations seem to 'fit' you best. In each case decide why you chose this orientation.

If you are not at all certain about which one applies to you, then first eliminate those that definitely do **not** apply to you.

Then ask yourself the question: What am I good at? Think of all the situations in your life: family, school and school subjects, sport, community, part-time work, hobbies, political activities, looking after pets and so on ...

Then ask yourself:

What am I uncomfortable or unhappy with?

Which of these activities do I really enjoy?

This may help you choose what direction you should follow.

Having made a preliminary choice, one should then obtain as much information as possible. Schools may provide valuable information. Newspapers often have special vocational supplements towards the end of the year. Technikons, colleges or universities in your area could be contacted. It should be borne in mind that many courses can be studied part time or by correspondence. Moreover, there are many new courses at all these institutions, some of which are relatively short courses with a specific applied focus.

It is also very helpful to speak to someone in your field of interest concerning the demands of the job or career and the challenges, difficulties or conditions associated with it. Working as a volunteer or as a student during holidays can be particularly useful in learning about the realities of a certain work situation.

All careers nowadays are open to both men and women. Nonetheless, one should be realistic about the demands that multiple role fulfillment can make on women if they marry and have children. A career which

allows for flexible working hours or the possibility of working from home has much to commend it in this regard.

Entrepreneurship

High unemployment means that many young people may be unable to find work and may have to create their own jobs. Already some schools are beginning to introduce talks and information about being an entrepreneur.

Essentially it means using your initiative and talents, to identify a need in the community that you can satisfy, and charging for the goods or service you are providing. Many enterprises had humble beginnings. To start with, you should find out as much as possible about being self-employed and be willing to begin in a very small way. You must develop an awareness of needs and opportunities in your community. Then you can decide whether there is something you could do about these needs. Once you have an idea, go and discuss it with people who know about business matters. Then make a plan and try it out.

SUMMING UP

What is abundantly clear is that the teenager faces many challenges, opportunities and uncertainties. Moreover, today's teenager will also be confronted by forces in the environment which he or she may still lack the skill, personality or experience to deal with. On the other hand, many teenagers display remarkable enthusiasm, resourcefulness and energy. They have much to learn about life, yet, having grown up in a world very different from that in which their parents grew up, they may sometimes be in a position to teach them a thing or two!

It is evident that the entire social fabric in which families and children are embedded has been disrupted and community bonds have weakened, often leaving parents and children isolated with little community support in times of uncertainty and crisis. It is important, therefore, that forces in the community learn to co-operate, to find common ground and to be mutually supportive in fostering the development and wellbeing of all members of their community.

There are discernable moves in this direction. For example, police forums are inviting the community, parents, schools, volunteers and professionals to join hands in the fight against crime and drugs. Many religious groups are becoming centres of mutual support and pastoral care. Some schools are creating opportunities for parents to meet in small groups to establish closer contact with one another. There is an established youth culture; perhaps we also need a parent culture.

The establishment of such groups and of mini-communities within the large impersonal cities and towns in which the majority of people live may be an effective way of providing a more supportive environment for parents and children alike.

FAMILIES, STRESS AND COPING



POINT TO PONDER

'In the end, there are only two lasting bequests parents can leave youth: one being roots, and the other being wings' (John D Santrock).

Adults Coping with Stress

Ending All of Stress

Supporting It