

Adolescence: Development, Identity, Behaviour and Risk- taking

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What concerns you most in terms of sexual health for the young people you work with ?

Profound developmental changes...

- Physical (sexual maturity)
- Cognitive (concrete to abstract)
- Psychosocial (identity and personality, peer relationships)

These different aspects of adolescent development are not necessarily synchronised!

Youth versus adolescence

- Adolescence – a biological process
- Youth – a socially-defined period of life

Cognitive development (11 years onwards)

The adolescent develops the capacity to use more **abstract** thinking, to:

- process **hypothetical propositions (what ifs)** & consider multiple possible outcomes
- think **into the future** well beyond the immediate experience
- **reflect analytically** on their own thinking
- take **alternative viewpoints**, consider other peoples' perspectives

A context of change

- New situations - first times
- Changing social relationships
- Changing expectations of self & others
- Changing educational & financial demands
- Changing sexuality & physical appearance

Preoccupations

- Am I normal?
- Who am I?
- Where am I going?

Tasks of Adolescence

1. Adjust to sexually maturing bodies & feelings
2. Develop and apply abstract thinking skills
3. Develop and apply a more complex level of perspective taking
4. Develop and apply new coping skills in areas such as decision-making, problem solving, and conflict resolution
5. Identify meaningful moral standards, values and belief systems
6. Understand and express more complex emotional experiences
7. Form friendships that are mutually close and supportive
8. Establish key aspects of identity
9. Meet the demands of increasingly mature roles responsibilities
10. Renegotiate relationships with adults in parenting roles

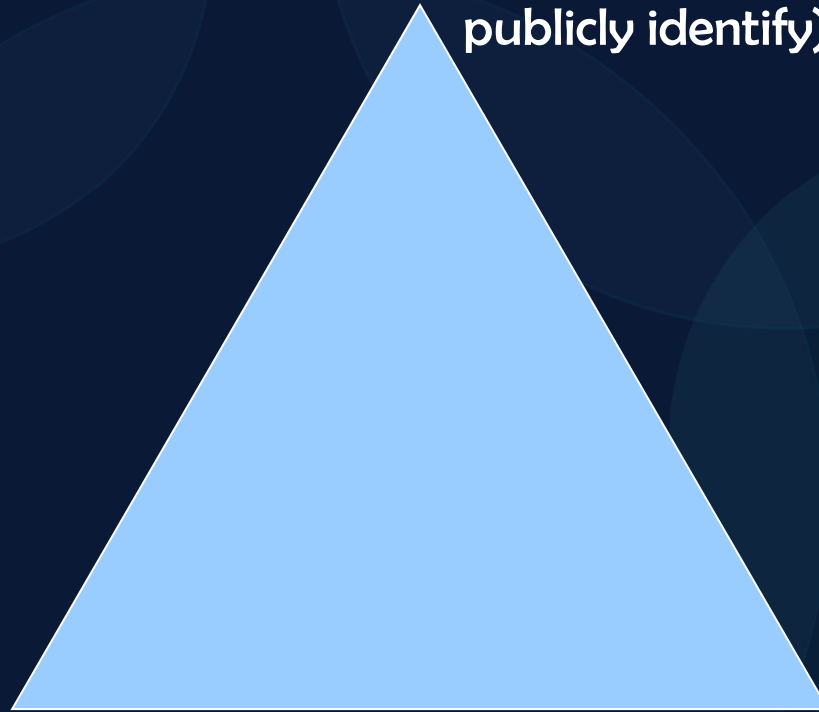
(Raising Teens, Harvard School of Public Health, 2001)

Sexual Identity as a Developmental Task

Identity achievement is a central task for adolescence: "experiencing oneself as a sexual being, making decisions about sexuality, and learning to relate in a sexual way can all contribute to that sense of identity"

Sexual Trichotomy

Identity (how we self identify and/or publicly identify)



Orientation
(who we are attracted to)

Behaviour (the sexual contacts we have)

Sexuality Identity

Identity can be hindered by difficulties in the sexual domain:

- early or late maturity
- early sexual initiation
- poor self esteem
- sex used to gain power over others
- sex as inappropriate identity focus (feeling defined by sexual attractiveness)



Adolescent Risk Behaviours

- Normal developmental stage
- Risk behaviours often occur together
- Often due to unexpected situations
- Negative and positive outcomes
- Aim not to stop behaviours but to minimise harm:

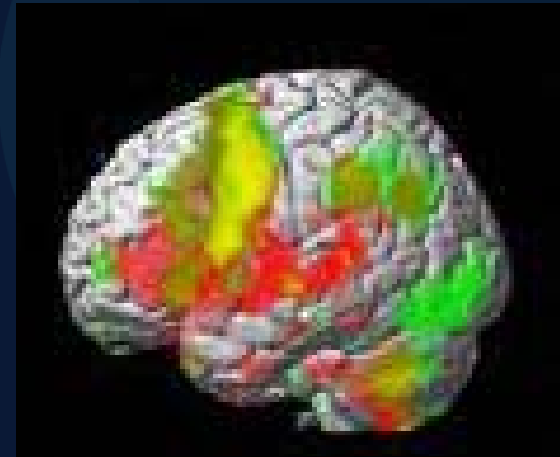
“enhance normal healthy development by creating skills and options for young people”

More about brain development ...

The brain continues to develop into the mid-teenage years, finishing in the mid-twenties

Last part to develop is the *pre-frontal cortex*...responsible for 'executive' functioning:

1. Planning
2. Prioritising
3. Organising thoughts
4. Suppressing impulses
5. Weighing consequences



Risk factors for Pregnancy

- Poverty
- Children in care
- Children of teenage mothers
- Low educational achievement
- Poor transition from school to work at 16
- Sexual abuse
- Mental health problems
- Crime

What influences young peoples
decision making around their
sexual behaviour?

Factors that shape young peoples sexual behaviour

A systematic review:

- 268 studies
- 246 journal articles
- 22 books

Aim:

- To examine how social and cultural forces shape young peoples behaviour and explain why strategies and campaigns to date have had disappointing result

Themes

1. Young people assess potential sexual partners as 'clean' or 'unclean'
2. Sexual partners have a important influence on behaviour in general
3. Condoms are stigmatising and associated with lack of trust
4. Gender stereotypes are crucial in determining social expectations and in, turn behaviour
5. There are penalties and rewards for sex from society
6. Reputations and social displays of sexual activity or inactivity are important
7. Social expectations hamper communication about sex

** Themes are not exclusive to any particular country cultural background*

1. Young people assess potential sexual partners as 'clean or 'unclean'

- Based on how well they know them
- Their appearance
- Apparent preparedness

2. Sexual partners have a important influence on behaviour in general

- To strengthen a relationship
- To please a partner
- To get pregnant
- Fear of retribution

3. Condoms are stigmatising and associated with lack of trust

- Carrying condoms implies sexual experience (+ and -)
- Asking to use a condom implies that the partner is diseased

4. Gender stereotypes are crucial in determining social expectations, and behaviour

- Men active, women chaste
- Men expected to seek physical pleasure, in women seen as 'loose' or 'cheap'
- For women, sex linked to romance
- For men sex linked with need
- Women responsible for pregnancy prevention

5. There are penalties and rewards for sex from society

- Depending on gender can raise or lower social status
- Pregnancy can be an escape
- Sex a way of obtaining money or gifts

6. Reputations and social displays of sexual activity or inactivity are important

- Chastity for women, activity for men
- Reporting sexual experience important to men
- Accusations of 'gay' for men not having sex with girlfriends

7. Social expectations hamper communication about sex

- Young people in general and young women in particular unable to discuss sex or acknowledge desire
- Sex is therefore difficult to plan
- Discussion about condoms implies agreeing to sex
- Avoiding talk of condom use also keeps the option of refusing sex open

“You don’t want to assume that you are going all the way”

Risk environments

Tim Rhodes et al suggest the term 'risk environment' to identify how risks are embedded in settings rather than just individuals

This entails a 'focus on the *social situations*, *structures* and *places* in which risk is produced' to identify opportunities to develop policies and interventions which will minimise harm.

Rise of Raunch Culture

‘This new raunch culture didn't mark the death of feminism; it was evidence that the feminist project had already been achieved. We'd "earned" the right to look at *Playboy*; we were "empowered" enough to get Brazilian bikini waxes’

(Ariel Levy, *Raunch Culture*, 2006)

Rise of Raunch Culture

‘Without a doubt there are some women who feel their most sexual with their vaginas waxed, their labia trimmed, their breasts enlarged, and their garments flossy and scant. I am happy for them. I wish them many blissful and lubricious loops around the pole. But there are many other women (and, yes, men) who feel constrained in this environment, who would be happier and feel hotter - more empowered, more sexually liberated, and all the rest of it - if they explored other avenues of expression and entertainment’

(Ariel Levy, Raunch Culture, 2006)

WHO Life skills for young people

- Make sound decisions about relationships and sexual intercourse and stand up for those decisions
- Deal with the pressure of unwanted sex
- Recognise a situation that might turn risky or violent
- Know how and where to ask for help
- Know how to negotiate protected sex and other forms of safe sex when ready for sexual relationships