

Essay title:

Life, Adolescence



Essay Title: Describe the developmental, social, and biological changes that a person goes through during their adolescent years. Plagiarism Declaration:

Introduction There are different developmental phases that a human being progresses through in the course of life, starting as infants and children, and then developing into adolescence, followed by adulthood and then finally old age. Each of these phases has its own distinctive psychological, social and biological characteristics which people go through in life (Mintz, 2008). This text focuses on the adolescence stage of human life which is defined by Weiten (2010) as “ a transitional period between childhood and adulthood” (p. 463). In addition, Weiten (2010) states that there is no precise age for this phase but however can be estimated as starting from the age of 13 up to about 21 or 22 (Weiten, 2010). Some of the developmental, social and biological changes that this essay sets out to explore include the general development of the human body and brain and new practices that adolescents experience such as sex and drug abuse. As a result of studies that have been carried out on the development of adolescents, it is apparent that an individual experiences changes in both their psychological and physiological health. A more precise definition provided by Blenchman and Brownell (1998) states that “ adolescence begins with the biological change of puberty and ends with the assumption of adult work and family roles, yielding different development ages for each young person” (p. 46).

Physiological and Developmental changes During adolescence the human body goes through drastic biological development. This includes the period when the body height and weight increases the most; this period is known as the adolescent growth spurt (Weiten, 2010). At around this stage in the

development of a human being, puberty begins which is characterised in males by the emergence of things like pimples, facial and pubic hair, voice change and the physical development of muscles and body parts such as the penis and testes; in addition adolescence in males is also marked by the first occurrence of ejaculation. In females, adolescence is also characterised by pimples and pubic hair but furthermore includes the development of the breasts, more rounded body contours, the uterus, clitoris and labia; additionally it is also characterised by the first occurrence of menstruation (Weiten, 2010). Adolescence is also a time of significant advancement in the behaviour of individuals, cognition and the brain. At the level of the brain, the prefrontal cortex which is the section in the front of the human brain develops the most and continues to do so throughout adolescence (Blakemore, & Choudry, 2006). Two main changes in the brain have been revealed by studies, firstly Myelin which enhances the transmission speed of the brain is formed around the developing neurons that are responsible for transmitting information. Secondly, synapses between neurons increase in density at first but then a period of synaptic elimination or pruning takes place following the increase. Research has identified that this ‘pruning’ process involves the strengthening of those connections which are used the most in the brain and the elimination of those which are used the least (Blakemore, & Choudry, 2006). In addition, the analysis of these biological changes or advancements in the human brain during puberty and so adolescence has been made more effective and detailed by the use of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) which provides researchers with three-dimensional images of the living brain; In the past studies on the brain could

only be carried out following the death of the subject (Blakemore, & Choudry, 2006). The brain which has two distinct hemispheres is made up of white matter and grey matter and MRI scans show that as people progress through adolescence, the density of white matter increases which reflects the increase in Myelin stated above; specifically there are increases in the connections of speech regions in the brain. Another biological development is that of the corpus callosum which joins the two hemispheres of the brain (Blakemore, & Choudry, 2006). However, though the white matter density generally increases, the grey matter density increases at times and at other times decreases; for instance when the density of synapses increases as stated above, the grey matter also increases, however when the pruning process commences all excess synapses are eliminated and thus leading to a decrease in the density of grey matter (Blakemore, & Choudry, 2006).

Social, Behavioural and Cognitive changes It has also been proven that as the brain develops, the ability to control thoughts and behaviour is enhanced. This includes things like being able to make more logical decisions, using brain memory more effectively, being able to focus one's attention on a particular subject and also being able to multitask (Blakemore, & Choudry, 2006). The behavioural changes of people as they progress through adolescence also reflect unstable emotions and uncertainty about identity; this, to a certain extent, is explained by the changes in hormonal stability. This uncertainty about identity is characterised by confusion and lack of direction in life. The task of achieving an identity is one that faces people as they develop through adolescence and it involves defining how an adolescent fits into society (Sigelman, & Rider, 2009). Establishing an identity is made an

incredibly complicated process by the diverse environment that humans have created and live in; this is because the environment offers a large number of options in terms of what and who to be in life (Sigelman, & Rider, 2009). Adolescents change their behaviour as they become more conscious about their appearance, for example how adolescence spend money trying to get rid of the pimples on their faces (Bateson, & Martin, 1999). A major social change that takes place at the adolescence phase of life is how individuals begin to interact with and become more attracted to the opposite sex as a result of sexual maturity which follows puberty. As a result of this and other social influences mentioned later on in this text, most humans start to engage in sexual behaviour during adolescence (Bateson, & Martin, 1999). An analysis of the behaviour of adolescents shows that people at this phase in their lives take part the most in risky behaviour. Such risky behaviour includes things like experimenting with drugs, smoking, drinking and engaging in unprotected sex (Bateson, & Martin, 1999). As adolescents make mainly short-term decisions and do not consider the long-term consequences, these risky decisions may lead to undesirable consequences such as falling pregnant or acting violently after drug abuse (Bray et al., 2010). On the topic of cognitive development, according to Blakemore and Choudry (2006), it has been proven that socially at the adolescence phase of life, humans develop the ability to understand other people and also develop " the ability to take on the view of another person" (p. 302). A development which is linked to social cognitive behaviour is the enhancement of the amygdala which is associated with the processing of emotions in the brain. As a result of this development, as people advance into adolescence, they

enhance their recognition of facial expressions; however more research still has to be carried out on the development of social cognition during adolescence as the study is fairly new and so still developing (Blakemore, & Choudry, 2006). According to Bray, Gooskens, Moses, Kahn and Seekings (2010), “ one of the most demanding and often traumatic changes for adolescents in every part of the Valley is their entry into the world of dating and sexual relationships" (p. 253). There are various social pressures associated with an adolescent's sexual activities; In addition HIV/AIDS is a major concern in South Africa as people get exposed to sexual intercourse the most at this phase in their life. As people progress into being an adolescent, they usually form gender cliques or gangs which end up merging with the cliques of the opposite sex over time (Bray et al., 2010). When children go into adolescence, they are likely to experience their ‘ first love’ which basically means that they start to experience feelings for the opposite sex. This is also associated with a lot of emotional activity and rejection. These new experiences in turn lead to sexual activity between adolescents. Studies in Cape Town have shown that sexual activity differs according to the social status and wealth of the particular adolescent group in question. According to Bray et al. (2010) “ the poorer the neighbourhood, the younger the age of first sex" (p. 259). In support of this point, a survey carried out in Cape Town in 2002 proved that in general adolescents from poor African neighbourhoods have sex at a younger age than adolescents from poor coloured neighbourhoods, who in turn have had sex at a younger age than those from wealthier coloured neighbourhoods, and they have had sex at a younger age than adolescents from white neighbourhoods. These studies

however did show that most adolescents in Cape Town do not become sexually active until 17, 18 and 19 years of age; and by the age of 22, 4 out of 5 people would have had sex (Bray et al., 2010). There has also been research into the reasons why people tend to start experiencing sexual relationships during adolescence. Such reasons include how boys at some high schools aim to have sex before the legal age of sixteen which will lead to more respect from their fellow peers. The same survey in Cape Town also disclosed that others think it is 'cool' to have sex and give in to the influences of peer pressure (Bray et al., 2010). Generally adolescents that have not yet lost their virginity feel left out when their counterparts that have lost their virginity are having conversations about their sexual experiences. Psychological studies have also revealed that activities or practises that are forbidden in cultures are attractive to adolescents, for example, it is generally forbidden in African cultures to engage in sexual activities before marriage, breaking this 'rule' therefore brings about a certain thrill which drives adolescents to participate in sexual activities (Bray et al., 2010). A lot of the things that characterise adolescence are triggered by external influences from the environment; for example at this stage in their lives, people become more conscious of looks and appearance because of how other in the same peer group look and how the media expresses appearance. Another main reason that causes adolescents to be conscious of their appearance is the desire to be perceived as being attractive to the opposite sex; In addition, because of these reasons, adolescents tend to have a desire for designer clothing labels and famous brands (Bray et al., 2010). Conclusion In conclusion, adolescents go through a lot of drastic

changes as they make the transition into adulthood and attach themselves to an identity. As explored in this essay, these drastic changes include physical developmental changes in the body, biological changes in terms of the development of the brain and social changes which are related to behaviour. The commencement of relationships and enhanced thinking abilities is also a key part of adolescence. After exploring the various issues above, it is therefore fair to say that adolescence is a very complex stage in life. The evidence of the developments that occur as a person progresses through adolescence is increasing as technology brings about new ways to study behaviour and the human brain.

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