CHAPTER 3

EMOTIONAL & SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

A quest for emotional and social competence

"Adults influence me more than my friends because they have more wisdom and experience in the world."

Girl, 16

Although the stereotype of adolescence emphasizes emotional outbursts and mood swings, in truth, the teen years are a quest for emotional and social competence.

Emotional competence is the ability to perceive, assess, and manage one's own emotions. Social competence is the capacity to be sensitive and effective in relating to other people. Cognitive development in the adolescent brain gives teens increasing capacity to manage their emotions and relate well to others.

Unlike the physical changes of puberty, emotional and social development is not an inevitable biological process during adolescence. Society expects that young people will learn to prevent their emotions from interfering with performance and relate well to other people, but this does not occur from brain development alone—it must be cultivated.

Four areas of emotional and social development

Emotional and social development work in concert: through relating to others, you gain insights into yourself. The skills necessary for managing emotions and successful relationships have been called "emotional intelligence" and include self-awareness,

social awareness, self-management, and the ability to get along with others and make friends.

Self-awareness: What do I feel?

Self-awareness centers on young people learning to recognize and name their emotions. Feelings cannot be labeled accurately unless conscious attention is paid to them, and that involves going deeper than saying one feels "good," "bad," or the all-purpose "OK."

Going deeper means an adolescent might discover he or she feels "anxious" about an upcoming test, or "sad" when rejected by a potential love interest. Identifying the source of a feeling can lead to figuring out constructive ways to resolve a problem.

Without this awareness, undefined feelings can become uncomfortable enough that adolescents may grow withdrawn or depressed or pursue such numbing behaviors as drinking alcohol, using drugs, or overeating.

Social awareness: What do other people feel?

While it is vital that youth recognize their own emotions, they must also develop empathy and take into account the feelings of others. Understanding the thoughts and feelings of others and appreciating the value of human differences are the cornerstones of social awareness.

Cognitive development during adolescence may make social awareness difficult for some young people. Adolescents actually read emotions through a different part of the brain than do adults. Dr. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd, director of Neuropsychology and Cognitive Neuroimaging at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, took magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans of the brains of both teenagers and adults as they were shown images of faces that clearly expressed fear. All the adults correctly identified fear. About half of the teens got it wrong, mistaking the expression as that of shock, sadness, or confusion.

Yurgelun-Todd discovered that on the MRI scans of the adults, both the limbic area of the brain (the part of the brain linked to emotions) and the prefrontal cortex (connected to judgment and reasoning) were lit up. When teens saw the same images, the limbic area was bright, but there was almost no activity in the prefrontal cortex. Until the prefrontal cortex fully develops in

BRAIN BOX

Increases in estrogen and testosterone at puberty literally change the brain structure so that it processes social situations differently. Pubertal hormones prompt a proliferation of receptors for oxytocin, a hormone that functions as a neurotransmitter, in the limbic area of the brain, where emotional processing occurs. The effect of increased oxytocin is to increase feelings of self-consciousness, to the point where an adolescent may truly feel that his or her behavior is the focus of everyone else's attention. These feelings of having the world as an audience peak around age 15 and then decline.

SOURCE: Steinberg, L. (2008) A social neuroscience perspective on adolescent risk-taking. *Developmental Review*, 28, 78–106.

early adulthood, teens may misinterpret body language and facial expressions. Adults can help by telling teens how they are feeling. For example, a parent can say, "I'm not mad at you, just tired and crabby."

Self-management: How can I control my emotions?

Self-management is monitoring and regulating one's emotions and establishing and working toward positive goals. Adolescents can experience intense emotions with puberty. Researchers have found that the increase of testosterone in both boys and girls at puberty literally swells the amygdala, an area of the brain associated with social acceptance, responses to reward, and emotions, especially fear.

Nonetheless, adolescents can and do learn to manage their emotions. Self-management in a young person involves using developing reasoning and abstract thinking skills to step back, examine emotions, and consider how those emotions bear on longer-term goals. By actively managing emotions rather than reacting to a flood of feelings, young people can learn to avoid the pitfalls and problems that strong emotions often evoke. Recognizing that they have the power to choose how to react in a situation can greatly improve the way adolescents experience that situation.

Peer relationships: How can I make and keep friends?

Social and emotional development depends on establishing and maintaining healthy, rewarding relationships based on cooperation, effective communication, and the ability to resolve conflict and resist inappropriate peer pressure.

These social skills are fostered by involvement in a peer group, and teens generally prefer to spend increasing amounts of time with fellow adolescents and less time with family. Peers provide a new opportunity for young people to form necessary social skills and an identity outside the family.

Possible causes of heightened emotions in adolescents

- Hormones, which set off physical changes at puberty, also affect moods and general emotional responses in teens.
- Concerns about physical changes—height, weight, facial hair, developing breasts in girls—are a source of sensitivity and heightened emotions.
- Irregular meal patterns, skipping breakfast, and fasting to lose weight can affect mood.
- Inadequate sleep can lead to moodiness, gloominess, irritability, and a tendency to overreact.
- Experiencing the normal ups and downs of social relationships, especially romantic relationships, can make a teen feel anything from elation to abject despair.

The influence of peers is normal and expected. Peers have significant sway on day-to-day values, attitudes, and behaviors in relation to school, as well as tastes in clothing and music. Peers also play a central role in the development of sexual identities and the formation of intimate friendships and romantic relationships.

Friends need not be a threat to parents' ultimate authority. Parents remain central throughout adolescence. Young people depend on their families and adult caregivers for affection, identification, values, and decision-making skills. Teens report, and research confirms, that parents have more influence than peers on whether or not adolescents smoke, use alcohol and other drugs, or initiate sexual intercourse.

Teens also frequently seek out adult role models and advisors such

> **"My mom is my biggest influence because she always knows the answers to my questions and would never tell me anything that would hurt me in the long run."**
>
> *Boy, 15*

Popularity plusses and minuses

Most parents wish their teenagers to be popular. Certainly, most teens want to be popular, too. However, a recent study in the journal *Child Development* suggests that being on the A-list is not always what it's cracked up to be.

The advantages of popularity are that popular adolescents possess a broader array of social skills than their less well-liked peers, better self-concepts, a greater ability to form meaningful relationships with both friends and parents, and greater ability to resolve conflicts within these relationships.

But there is a downside. Popular teens are at higher risk for exposure to—and participation in—whatever risky behaviors are condoned by their peers. Popularity can be associated with higher levels of alcohol and substance abuse and minor deviant behavior, such as vandalism and shoplifting.

Popular kids tend to get along better with their friends and family members and seem to have more emotional maturity than others. This maturity can be compromised by their need for group approval, as popular teens may be even more willing than other teens to adopt behaviors they think will earn them greater acceptance. Sometimes the behaviors are "pro-social"—as when a group pressures popular members to be less aggressive and hostile. Sometimes, when risky behaviors are valued by popular kids, the behaviors are more deviant.

SOURCE: Allen, J.P., Porter, M.R., & McFarland, F,C. (2005). The two faces of adolescents' success with peers: adolescent popularity, social adaptation, and deviant behavior. *Child Development.* 76(3), 747–760.

as teachers, relatives, club leaders, or neighbors. Studies show that connections to teachers, for example, can be just as protective as connections to parents in delaying the initiation of sexual activity and use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.

Some teenagers, of course, trade the influence of parents and other adults for the influence of their peers, but this usually happens when family closeness and parental monitoring are missing. Youth need to learn independent-thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills from their parents or guardians and other caring adults, so they can apply these skills within their peer network.

The nature of social relationships changes as adolescents get older. Younger teens typically have at least one primary group of friends, and the members are usually similar in many respects, including gender. During the early teen years, both boys and girls are concerned with conforming and being accepted by their peer group.

"A good parent listens to you and does not look down on you."

Girl, 14

Emerging brain science indicates that during early adolescence social acceptance by peers may be processed by the brain similarly to other pleasurable rewards, such as receiving money or eating ice cream. This makes social acceptance highly desirable and helps explain why adolescents change their behavior to match their peers'. Teens often adopt the styles, values, and interests of the group to maintain an identity that distinguishes their group from other students.

Peer groups in middle adolescence (14-16 years) tend to contain both boys and girls, and group members are more tolerant of differences in appearance, beliefs, and feelings. By late adolescence (17-19 years), young people have diversified their peer network beyond a single clique or crowd and develop intimate relationships within these peer groups, such as one-on-one friendships and romances.

Dating is a way to develop social skills, learn about other people, and explore romantic and sexual feelings. The hormonal changes that accompany pu-

> **"My friends have inspired me to help anyone that I see in need."**
>
> *Girl, 12*

berty move adolescents toward dating relationships. Mainstream culture plays a role as well. Media and popular culture are awash in images and messages that promote adolescent sexuality and romance. Dating can lead to sexual activity, but also to opportunities for expanded emotional growth. Dating and friendships open up an adolescent to experiencing extremes of happiness, excitement, disappointment, and despair. Recent research has shown that both boys and girls value intimacy in romantic relationships, dispelling the prevailing stereotype that boys prefer casual sexual relationships.

Emotional and social development in context

Adolescents face an astonishing array of options in modern society—everything from choosing multiple sources of entertainment to deciding among alternative educational or vocational pathways. Teenagers are confronted with more decisions, and more complicated decisions, than their parents and grandparents faced, often in complex environments that trigger conflicting feelings and desires.

Responsible decision-making involves generating, implementing, and evaluating ethical choices in a given situation. The choices ideally will benefit both the decision-maker and the well-being of others.

The still-developing frontal lobes in the brain render adolescents vulnerable to making poor decisions; they can have trouble forming judgments when things are cloudy or uncertain. The Cognitive Development chapter gives strategies for helping young people with their decision-making skills.

Decisions about risk-taking often are made in group situations—settings that activate intense feelings and trigger impulses. In a recent experimental study, teenagers, college students, and adults were asked to play a video driving game. When participants were alone, levels of risky driving were the same for the teens, college students, and adults. However, when they played the game in front of friends, risky driving doubled among the adolescents and increased by 50 percent among the college students, but remained unchanged among the adults. Risky behavior increased for both boys and girls.

In a follow-up study, Laurence Steinberg, PhD, of Temple University used functional MRI to map brain activity during the video driving game. The brain scans showed that teen brains respond differently when peers are present compared to when they are not present. When teens played the driving game alone, brain regions linked to cognitive control and reasoning were activated. When peers were present, additional brain circuitry that processes rewards was also activated,

The building blocks of empathy

Empathy is the ability to identify with another person's concerns and feelings. Empathy is the foundation of tolerance, compassion, and the ability to differentiate right from wrong. Empathy motivates teens and adults alike to care for those who are hurt or troubled.

Ways you can help build empathy in an adolescent:

- Demonstrate tolerance and generosity in your thoughts, words, and actions.
- Actively participate in religious or social organizations that ask you to focus on issues larger than yourself.
- Fine-tune your own empathetic behaviors and act on your concerns to comfort others, so that teenagers can copy your actions.
- Build a young person's emotional vocabulary by using such "feelings" statements as "Your friend seems really (anxious, mad, discouraged)." You can also point out nonverbal feeling cues to a teenager.
- Teach empathy and awareness of others, such as helping youth understand on an emotional level the negative consequences of prejudice.
- Talk with a young person about how his or her own suffering can lead to compassion for other teens who experience suffering.

suggesting that, for teens, potentially rewarding—and potentially risky—behaviors become even more gratifying in the presence of peers. By late adolescence and early adulthood, the cognitive control network matures, so that even among friends in a high-pressure situation, the urge to take risks diminishes.

Because heightened vulnerability to peer influence and risk-taking appears to be a natural and normal part of neurobiological development, telling adolescents not to give in to peer influence may not be effective, especially during early adolescence. Instead, teens may be best protected from harm through limiting exposure to risky situations. Harm-reducing tactics include raising the price of cigarettes, rigorously policing the sale of alcohol to minors, placing restrictions on teen driving, and making reproductive health services more accessible to adolescents.

"A good friend is 100% real with you all the time."

Boy, 16

WAYS TO HELP TEENS MAKE HEALTHY SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Discuss the meaning of true friendship

People have plenty of acquaintances, but true friends can be rare gifts. Talk with young people about what distinguishes true friends from situational friends. True friends like you for yourself. They try to help and encourage you, and they stand by you when the other kids make fun of you or give you a hard time. A true friend does not judge you by the clothes you wear or how much expensive stuff you have, pressure you to go along with the crowd, make you do dangerous or illegal things, or leave you high and dry when things get rough.

Help teens get involved in things they care about

Young people can make friends at school, but they can also form relationships through mutual interests. Find out what adolescents are interested in—computers, music, dance, poetry slams, sports, science fiction/fantasy—and help start a club, or get teens involved in existing organizations.

Find role models for friendship

Examples of good friendships abound in movies, books, and songs, and also in your community. Friendship could be the theme of a book club or a movie series in a youth program. Expose adolescents to real-life role models and then discuss what good friendships have in common. What attributes or values do these people share?

Promote service to others

Getting youth involved with a service project in your community is a way to strengthen friendships, both with people their own age and across the generations, and to make social connections through the pursuit of common goals. Community service also promotes the values of caring and kindness, and it helps adolescents develop a sense of empathy. Let teens decide what kind of service project they would like to do.

Teach about the relationship between honesty and tact

Friends don't tear each other down—even in the name of honesty. You can help sharpen a young person's decision-making skills by talking about ways of handling certain situations without being hurtful. Possible scenarios include what to say when someone asks, "Do you like my new haircut?" or what to say when a friend or relative mentions, "I've never seen you wear the sweater I gave you."

Talk about boundaries

Being a friend does not mean being a doormat or being joined at the hip 24/7. Friendships need boundaries, just as other relationships do. Stress the importance of boundaries, establishing limits, and respecting privacy and "alone time," which make friendships healthier and stronger in the long run.

Teen Stress

Teens feel the pressure

"I think stress is a problem for teenagers like me…because when you get a certain age, you start worrying about certain things, like, when your puberty comes, your body starts to develop more, and then you get to worry about school, your families, and what most people think about you." Girl, 14

You may have caught yourself thinking, "Teen stress? Wait until they're older—then they'll know stress."

Yet teen stress is an important health issue. The early teen years are marked by rapid changes—physical, cognitive, and emotional. Young people also face changing relationships with peers, new demands at school, family tensions, and safety issues in their communities. The ways in which teens cope with these stressors can have significant short- and long-term consequences on their physical and emotional health. Difficulties in handling stress can lead to mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety disorders.

What is stress? It is the body's reaction to a challenge, which could be anything from outright physical danger to asking someone for a date or trying out for a sports team. Good and bad things create stress. Getting into a fight with a friend is stressful, but so is a passionate kiss and contemplating what might follow.

The human body responds to stressors by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The hypothalamus signals the adrenal glands to produce more of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol and release them into the bloodstream. The hormones speed up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and metabolism. Blood vessels open wider to let more blood flow to large muscle groups, pupils dilate to improve vision, and the liver releases stored glucose to increase the body's energy. This physical response to stress kicks in much more quickly in teens than in adults because the part of the brain that can calmly assess danger and call off the stress response, the prefrontal cortex, is not fully developed in adolescence.

The stress response prepares a person to react quickly and perform well under pressure. It can help teens be on their toes and ready to rise to a challenge.

The stress response can cause problems, however, when it overreacts or goes on for too long. Long-term stressful situations, like coping with a parent's divorce or being bullied at school, can produce a lasting, low-level stress that can wear out the body's reserves, weaken the immune system, and make an adolescent feel depleted or beleaguered.

The things that cause adolescents stress are often different from what stresses adults. Adolescents will have different experiences from one another, as well. A good example of this can be seen by observing teens at a dance.

Some are hunched in the corner, eyes downcast and hugging the wall. They can't wait for the night to be over. Others are out there dancing their feet off, talking and laughing and hoping the music never stops. In between, you

THINGS THAT CAN CAUSE YOUTH STRESS

- School pressure and career decisions
- After-school or summer jobs
- Dating and friendships
- Pressure to wear certain types of clothing, jewelry, or hairstyles
- Pressure to experiment with drugs, alcohol, or sex
- Pressure to be a particular size or body shape. With girls, the focus is often weight. With boys, it is usually a certain muscular or athletic physique.
- Dealing with the physical and cognitive changes of puberty
- Family and peer conflicts
- Being bullied or exposed to violence or sexual harassment
- Crammed schedules, juggling school, sports, after-school activities, social life, and family obligations

may find a few kids pretending to be bored, hanging out with their friends, and maybe venturing onto the floor for a dance or two. So, is the dance uniformly stressful?

Several strategies can help teens with their stress. It is best, whenever possible, to help teens address stressful situations immediately. Listen to them, be open, and realize that you can be supportive even if you cannot relate to what they are feeling. Tune in to your own levels of stress, since your overwhelmed feelings can be contagious. For chronic stress, parents or caring adults can help teens understand the cause of the stress and then identify and practice positive ways to manage the situation.

SIGNS AN ADOLESCENT IS OVERLOADED

- Increased complaints of headache, stomachache, muscle pain, tiredness
- Shutting down and withdrawing from people and activities
- Increased anger or irritability; i.e., lashing out at people and situations
- Crying more often and appearing teary-eyed
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Chronic anxiety and nervousness
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits, i.e., insomnia or being "too busy" to eat
- Difficulty concentrating

STRESS MANAGEMENT SKILLS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE—& ADULTS

- Talk about problems with others
- Take deep breaths, accompanied by thinking or saying aloud, "I can handle this"
- Perform progressive muscle relaxation, which involves repeatedly tensing and relaxing large muscles of the body
- Set small goals and break tasks into smaller, manageable chunks
- Exercise and eat regular meals
- Get proper sleep
- Break the habit of relying on caffeine or energy drinks to get through the day
- Focus on what you can control (your reactions, your actions) and let go of what you cannot (other people's opinions and expectations)
- Visualize and practice feared situations
- Work through worst-case scenarios until they seem amusing or absurd
- Lower unrealistic expectations
- Schedule breaks and enjoyable activities
- Accept yourself as you are; identify your unique strengths and build on them
- Give up on the idea of perfection, both in yourself and in others

SOURCE: Dyl, J. Helping teens cope with stress. *Lifespan.* Retrieved from www.lifespan.org/services/childhealth/parenting/teen-stress.htm