



Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

03

Psychological and
Developmental
Influences in Youth Ministry

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Lesson Three: Psychological and Developmental Influences in Youth Ministry

Lesson Introduction

Session Overview

- Thinking Developmentally
- Early Adolescence
- Middle Adolescence
- Late Adolescence
- Importance of Transitional Periods

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session you should:

- Identify the differences between early, middle, and late adolescence
- Explain the implications for each stage of development for youth ministry
- Demonstrate an appreciation of the importance of these transitional periods in the lifecycle

Introduction

This session provides a brief overview of the three periods of adolescence known as; early, middle, and late adolescence. While each period informs our developmental view of youth we also need to pay particular attention to how the stages work together in the transition for persons from childhood to adolescence and then adulthood.

Lesson Body

Thinking Developmentally

Youth workers often see youth travel through the process of becoming a unique individual, different from one's family and friends. Traditionally, theorists note youth go through three psycho-developmental tasks during this journey called adolescence: identity formation, autonomy, and belonging.

Identity

Erik Erickson, the leading theorist on identity formation, proposes that if adolescents do not emerge from this time with an integrated sense of self they will experience "identity confusion." Two of the vital components of Erickson's identity formation theory include personality and role experimentation. In some ways these function as different suits of clothes to try on. This is precisely why some adolescents can seem so different in personality from day to day. It is not simply due to the various physiological changes that are taking place, but perhaps due to an intentional shifting through the myriad personalities and roles they are trying until they find the one(s) that "fit." Choosing one role leads to a stable sense of self.

Autonomy

The process of becoming a unique individual different from one's family and friends, particularly parents, is called "individuation." Theorists describe the process as the development of the autonomous self in which one follows internal convictions. In some ways this process mirrors the opposite side of the coin, the search for "attachment" (which will be discussed later). Youth workers need to understand that individuation has little to do with the adolescent's feelings toward the parents. Healthy families go through adolescents' push for independence by treating the adolescent more as an adult. Stereotypical rebelliousness happens when parents attempt to control youth as when they were children. Authoritarian parenting commonly ends up backfiring as it pushes the young person further from parents rather than drawing them closer. This process of individuation is natural and necessary in the development of a healthy self and attempting to hold it back is akin to fighting gravity. At some point youth must exert their autonomy or they will remain children in their parent's house forever.

In part, our autonomy rests with sound decision making particularly in moral circumstances. Lawrence Kohlberg is a leading theorist with regard to the moral development of persons. His theory of moral development involves moral reasoning that unfolds in a series of stages. Kohlberg's theory specifies six stages of moral development, arranged in three levels.

<p>Level I: Preconventional/ Premoral</p>	<p>Moral values reside in external influences. The child is responsive to rules and evaluative labels, in terms of the physical power of those who impose the rules.</p>	<p>Stage 1: The obedience and punishment orientation includes both respect and fear. People defer to superior power or prestige, or at least to avoid trouble.</p> <p>Stage 2: Self-interest governs behavior. People comply in order to satisfy personal needs.</p>
<p>Level II: Conventional/Role Conformity</p>	<p>Moral values reside in performing the right role and in maintaining the expected order of society. People consider good behavior a value in its own right.</p>	<p>Stage 3: The good-boy/good-girl orientation includes people seeking to please and help others. People evaluate their behavior in terms of good or bad intentions.</p> <p>Stage 4: People seek to maintain social order. People often demonstrate a sense of "duty," and show respect for authority while maintaining the given social order. People behave out of a sense of obligation, not just trying to be "nice."</p>
<p>Level III: Postconventional/Self- Accepted Moral Principles</p>	<p>Kohlberg defines morality terms of conformity to shared standards, or rights. People base their allegiance upon a sense of right and wrong.</p>	<p>Stage 5: The contractual/legal orientation includes norms of right and wrong, often defined in terms of laws or institutionalized rules which seem to have a rational basis. When conflict arises between individual needs and law, people, while sympathetic to needs, believe the law must prevail.</p> <p>Stage 6: People base their concept of morality on individual principles of conscience. Moral decisions include existing social rules, but the conscience directs decisions based on mutual trust and respect, and principles that seem universal throughout life.</p>

While Kohlberg included six stages, he admitted that few individuals ever reach stage five and even fewer stage six (reserving that stage for people like Jesus, Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, Jr.).

Attachment

Closely associated with individuation is attachment. Recently developmental psychologists began looking at the importance of adolescent attachment to their parents. They found attachment to parents helps young people's sense of social competence and well-being, reflecting self-esteem, emotional adjustment, and physical health. Attachment provides important connections for the adolescent to the adult world as they negotiate their own passage from childhood to adulthood. An extremely important part of this journey is deciding which groups and causes one will give themselves to. Parental attachment plays a crucial role in this process, in providing security, and to enable the adolescent to not commit prematurely to any identity and/or community before they are developmentally equipped.

The general search for identity, autonomy and attachment occur throughout youth. However, developmental psychologists also note that young people seem to go through several transitional phases during the adolescence. While the actual physical ages might differ based on cultural influences, in general youth experience different biological, psychological and relational challenges during early, middle and late adolescence. The remainder of this session addresses each "age" of adolescence.

Early Adolescence (11-14)

Since the turn of the 20th century the onset of puberty has been steadily declining around the world. Researchers identify puberty with the onset of menarche in young women. Generally, this event corresponds to the onset of puberty in both sexes. With puberty comes secondary sexual characteristics such as the deepening of the male's voice, the development of breasts in women, and growth of body hair in the arm pits and pelvis region in both sexes. Undoubtedly, these changes are the source of both excitement and consternation of young persons.

Although Piaget's fourth and final stage of cognitive development—formal operational thought—roughly corresponds to this time of life, it has been my experience that not many early adolescents demonstrate these abilities. In fact, it seems that most still default to a more "concrete" processing. For a formal operational thinker, the ability to consider and conceptualize the abstract has developed. One of the sure signs of this stage is the ability to think about thinking.

The advanced concrete operations thinker—the early adolescent—is able to follow logical patterns and arguments quite well. For example, in one of Piaget's most famous experiments, a young person was presented with three beakers of the same capacity. Two of the beakers were of the exact same size and shape with the same amount of water in them. The third beaker was taller and more slender than the other two but of the same capacity. A person working in

concrete operations is able to pour the water among the various beakers understanding the amount is unchanging even though it looks different in the different sized beakers.

What is important to understand about the early adolescent's cognitive ability is their ability and comfort following linear reasoning. For example that $A + B = C$, or that God's grace + our sin = salvation. However, to discuss abstract concepts such as the Trinity will be beyond the cognitive ability of most young persons in this stage.

Identity Formation

Along with physical changes comes the ability to begin to think of one's self as separate from one's family of origin. Up until this point we only understand our own identity as being a son/daughter of our parents and thus embedded in our families of origin. With growing cognitive ability comes the growing capacity for self-awareness and self-reflection. These abilities—which develop at different rates in each individual—give way to the ability and necessity to exert one's individuality and uniqueness. In early adolescence this process is just beginning and some role experimentation may be evident, but by middle adolescence it is the norm.

Moral Development

Youth tend to reflect Kohlberg's stages two and three. These stages reflect moral reasoning based upon rewards and self interest or desire to be seen as "good." The young person in these stages will either obey because they believe it is in their self interest to do so or because they desire to be thought of as "good" or "obedient" by those in authority.

Relational/Social Development

Carol Gilligan says at this stage girls are the most relationally intuitive beings on the planet. She means by saying this that they are constantly "reading" the situation—"Do you like me?" Boys carry with them an internal reservoir of experiences and observations of suffering—they store it up and process it later and much slower than girls. This is to say boys take in a lot of information without seemingly being affected by it, at the time. However, in middle adolescence, as their cognitive abilities begin to catch up with girls, boys begin to process the experiences stored up in their reservoir. Generally speaking, youth maintain groups organized by gender, with girls spending time with girls and boys with other boys—although this changes to mixed groups as middle adolescence approaches.

Middle Adolescence (14-18)

The physical changes that began in the early adolescent generally run their course during middle adolescence. That is not to say that no physical change occurs after age 18 but the average person has completed the majority and most dramatic changes by this age. Middle adolescents typically show "strong preoccupation" with their changing bodies. This is an important issue for which those of us working with young persons must be sensitive. It can be "acceptable" among youth workers to "tease" young people about these changes . . . this should not be. Obviously the

young person cannot control the timing, duration, and affects of puberty. We must show extreme discretion if and when we broach this subject.

In middle adolescence, many young people achieve the ability to think abstractly. Piaget called this formal operational thought. One of the sure signs of this stage is the ability to think about thinking. This can be quite an exhilarating experience for the young person who is able to, for the first time, step outside their own skin enough to consider what it is that is taking place within her or him. With this new found ability come both blessings and distractions. Some developmental psychologists subdivide Piaget’s final stage of cognitive development into early and late formal operational thought.

It is characteristic of the early stage for thinking to overlook daily reality as the world becomes one gigantic possibility. The ability may become a distraction and evidenced in the common refrains offered by some middle adolescents, such as “what if?” or “but it’s possible” In the late stage a restoration of intellectual balance comes as the adolescent finally adjusts their thinking to address both daily life and “big questions.” In addition, many middle adolescents, particularly boys, will raise issues of the past will become necessary to deal with, particularly painful events of childhood. The good news is that youth now have the cognitive ability to address these issues.

Identity Formation

As mentioned before, role experimentation during middle adolescence remains the norm. Researcher James Marcia presents a helpful theory. Marcia (like Erickson) subscribes to the idea of “crisis” being quite important to identity formation. Crisis, as Marcia uses the term, defines a meaningful sifting through the alternatives. Youth go through the process in order to make a “commitment” to a particular role and path that suits the young person. Marcia defines the various combinations of “crisis” and “commitment” in the following ways,

Marcia’s Label	Identity Moratoriums	Foreclosure	Diffusion	Achievement
Crisis	Present	Absent	Absent	Present
Commitment	Absent	Present	Absent	Present

A young person who has done some sifting through the various roles and identities but has not yet made a commitment is in Identity Moratorium. This is probably the normal and healthy place for the majority of middle adolescents to occupy. Youth who have not meaningfully sifted through alternatives, but make a commitment, represent Identity Foreclosed. Young people suddenly close off life options, a perspective often unhealthy for youth. However, when Christian families coerce young people to make a decision for Christ at a young age, they may struggle dealing with alternatives. How can we help them avoid premature foreclosure? Perhaps the only way is to allow for doubts and role experimentation later in their adolescent years without condemning them for doing so.

For the person who has not done any sifting and has made no commitments they remain in the category Identity Diffused and basically “float” through life without any real aims and direction. Finally, Marcia identifies young people who both sift through alternatives and make

commitments in the category Identity Achievement. Youth now make authentic commitments but remain open to engage new challenges and possibilities. Frankly, youth workers hope young people ultimately reach this perspective, but most do not until after middle adolescence.

Relational/Social Development

Groups in middle adolescence appear noticeably different than in early adolescence, often including both male and female young people. The presence of both genders does not necessarily change the reality that the most trusted group of friends remains typically of the same gender as the young person. This group, known as the “cluster,” remains markedly different from a social “clique.” Clusters help with self-image. In other words young people of strong self-image will band together while those with lower self-image will also group together. The cluster typically describes a group of 4-7 young people (often same gender) that serve like a family to each other.

This group plays a vital role in the individuation of the young person as the cluster’s influence replaces parents for a time. This is not to say that parents do not always have a very strong influence in the life of the young person. However for young people, in the process to fully individuate and become their own unique self, the cluster plays an important role for a time. Generally, by the end of middle adolescence the cluster disbands as each member goes their own direction.

Moral Development

Middle adolescents model Kohlberg’s stage three and stage four in moral decision making. These stages reflect the desire to be seen as “good” and understanding duty, respectively. The young person in stage three will obey because they desire to be thought of as “good” or “obedient” by those in authority.

The adolescent in stage four makes an important step. A young person’s ability to think abstractly will enable him or her to conceptualize the need for a functional society, to have rules, justice, and order. This important distinction marks more “adult-like” thinking. The visible difference between the early and middle adolescents in this area, during times of open dialogue in groups, proves quite distinct.

Late Adolescence/Emerging Adulthood: Ages 18-25

Physical development is essentially a non-issue in late adolescence since the majority of persons become physically mature by about age 18. Although some developmental psychologists subdivide Piaget’s final stage of cognitive development into early and late formal operational thought, not all late adolescents reach the late stage of formal operations. However in this late age, some intellectual balance comes as the adolescent focuses their thinking.

Identity Formation

The goal of late adolescence/emerging adulthood is to complete the process of identity formation. Young people must sift through the alternatives and make a commitment of an identity that likely involves a role in life—typically in terms of finding meaningful work.

There is a growing new body of research on emerging adulthood. Jeffery Arnett identifies five characteristics of this age of emerging adults.

- An age of continuing identity exploration as young people try out various possibilities, especially in love and work.
- An age of instability as late adolescents postpone final decisions about work and family.
- An age where young people remain focused on themselves.
- An age of feeling in-between, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult.
- An age of possibilities, when hopes flourish, and when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.

These characteristics provide a strong framework for the identity formation process. Because this has not yet been resolved for the late adolescent/emerging adult they have not fully achieved adulthood, which is defined by Arnett as:

1. Accepting responsibility for one's self.
2. Making independent decisions.
3. Becoming financially independent.

Moving into these identity characteristics helps emerging adults finally embrace adulthood.

Moral Development

Emerging adults may remain in stages four and five. Some emerging adults may show signs of advancing toward, Kohlberg's final two stages as they consider, respectively, the rights of the community versus individuals and even the ability to conceptualize universal human rights. As mentioned above, Kohlberg doubts many people, regardless of age, enter full stage five (only 10% of the population) and even fewer stage six. Late adolescents, however, may exhibit some signs of these stages as they leave young adulthood.

Relational/Social Development

At this stage, late adolescents often make decisions about the type of person they would like to spend their lives with. Although this process began in middle adolescence, it takes center stage at this point. There may still be evidence of "groups" in the lives of late adolescents but more often than not the "groups" are closely associated couples. A good rule of thumb in dealing with late adolescents comes from Dr. Chap Clark, who suggests that late adolescents ought to be treated as adults but guided as adolescents.

While deeply conditioned by cultural expectations (not all youth experience this stage throughout the world), theorists speculate that identity formation has been de-railed due to a lack of cultural markers common in many cultures. Youth delay joining adulthood due to three mistaken assumptions that adulthood requires:

- Image—People must be gifted with a special uniqueness (such as been good looking) that gives the person in power a reason to feel good about themselves
- Performance—what I'm good at or excel at defines who I am
- Conformity—a view that young people who do not “stand out” must simply conform in order to survive.

Emerging adults may accept a sense of identity without giving into a particular image, They can accept the person God's has made them without an “ideal” body or personality. Emerging adults can exercise autonomy through a sense of vocation, a sense of contributing to life, without feeling they must constantly perform to be credible. Finally late adolescents can find a sense of community that allows them to be themselves without having either to lead or simply conform to social norms. As Emerging adults resolve these issues they move forward in life.

The Importance of Transitional Periods

The transitions into puberty and adolescence and then into adulthood are significant as we have encountered in this lesson. Youth need opportunities to identify these transitions. Often such transitions need “meaningful events” that help people identify with the transition. Theorists often identify these events, ceremonies, celebrations as rites of passage. Often going through ceremonies help you settle key issues including identity (who am I?), autonomy (what can I stand upon?) and attachment (who are my people?). Take some time to reflect on the following questions as you close this lesson. As you envision transitions both within adolescence (early, middle and late) as well as transitions out of childhood and into adulthood, how might you respond?

- Are there ceremonies that we could create akin to rites of passage in our churches/ministries to facilitate these transitions?
- What might those look like?
- How would they be beneficial to not only the individuals going through the ceremony but also to the congregation in informing them that these are people in process who deserve our love, respect, and partnership?
- Are their roles that the early, middle, and late adolescent ought to play in our congregations in which they are not currently involved?

Application

Interview an adolescent in each of the stages of development this week to explore further the developmental issues discussed here.

Identify at least one opportunity to celebrate a “rite of passage” with youth as they enter adolescence and leave for adulthood.

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

Do you remember the discomfort and/or elation you experience at this time of life? Who helped prepare you for these changes? Anyone?

When did you first begin to see yourself as unique from your family of origin? What were the accompanying behaviors that resulted from this realization?

What are ways we can meaningfully and sensitively discuss the realities of adolescent changes in the Church? Do any passages of scripture come to mind in discussing puberty and the accompanying transformation that occurs?

Did you experience a “cluster” of friends in your middle adolescence? What kind of influence did they have on you? What are some implications for youth ministry given the “sifting of alternatives” that is taking place in middle adolescence? How might we reassure parents/families during this time?

Dr. Chap Clark who suggests that late adolescents ought to be “Treated as adults but guided as adolescents.” How can this advice be actualized in your setting? Are there things that ought to occur in terms of contact with young people who have left our youth groups? What role(s) do healthy Christian couples play in the youth ministry in your setting?



Nazarene Youth International