

What Cross-Cultural Workers Ought to Know about Adolescence

Jesus was a teenager, but never an adolescent. So was Moses. So was Paul. So was George Washington. If you are working among non-Western people, that may be the case with them as well. If you are working in developing countries, you may have noticed that teenagers in the larger cities are adolescents, but those in the rural villages are not. Why is there this difference? What is adolescence? What does the Bible say about it? Should adolescents be treated as adults? What are the major problems of adolescence? How can those problems be prevented? Let's consider some of these questions.

What is adolescence?

Today adolescence is the time of life between puberty and adulthood. That seems simple enough, but it is much more complicated than it appears at first glance because of changes during the last 200 years.

- Puberty. Puberty originally meant, "of ripe age, adult." That is what it still means in many tribes where children go through rites of passage as teenagers to become full adults in their culture. However, in Western nations the age of sexual maturity has decreased by three or four years, but people do not become adults culturally at that time. Today puberty means only sexual maturity.
- Adulthood. People used to become adults in their early teens, such as Jewish children going through bat or bar mitzvah at 12 or 13. It is not clear when people become adults today in Western countries. They begin

paying adult prices in restaurants and theatres at 12, driving at 16, graduating and voting at 18, and buying liquor at 21. We have gone from the bar mitzvah to the bar as the final step to adulthood.

- Adolescence is the time of life after puberty but before adulthood; it did not exist much before the twentieth century and still exists only in Western (or Westernizing) countries.

What causes adolescence?

Culture. More than anyone else, cross-cultural workers should recognize the influence of culture. According to one Rabbi in the Talmud, a good man was one who "leads his children in the right path, and marries them just before they attain puberty." In pioneer America, "a marriage that sometimes united a boy of 16 to a girl of 14 was an occasion of merriment that brought out the whole fort." For 3000 years the minimum legal age of marriage in the Jewish, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and American cultures (as in most other cultures) was 12 for women and 14 for men. Not everyone married at those ages, but they were adults and could marry if they wanted to, just as people at 18 years of age can today.

What does the Bible say about Adolescence?

Nothing. It had not been invented yet in the Hebrew, Greek, or Roman cultures. In Bible times people were babies, children, grown-ups, men and women, but not adolescents. Look at some scripture passages.

- Moses: "Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'take this baby and nurse him for

me...When the child grew older...One day after Moses had grown up..." (Exodus, 2:9-11, NIV)

- Paul: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (1 Corinthians 13:11, NIV).

Should we treat adolescents like adults?

You probably think, "Teenagers are so irresponsible, certainly they cannot be expected to act like adults." Yet teenagers were treated as adults for thousands of years in most cultures, and they did fine. God trusted the care of his son into the hands of Mary, a teenager. Of course, the difference in Western cultures today is that we do not expect adult behavior from teenagers, and we do not prepare children to act like adults when they pass through puberty. People tend to behave as expected, so when we expect childish behavior from teens, we get it. Most adolescents today cannot be treated as adults because they have never learned to be responsible. Although they have developed adult capacities physically, mentally, and morally, our culture has not prepared them to be adults, as cultures did for thousands of years. Yes, we should treat adolescents as adults; we just need to prepare them to act responsibly. Preparing children and expecting adult behavior from adolescents prevents many teen problems.

What are the major problems of adolescence?

When difficulties occur during the teen years, they often center around our

invention of adolescence, and they occur in three major areas: identity, sexuality, and work.

- Identity. Adolescents have problems knowing who they are because we have not yet created a cultural identity for adolescents. They are neither children nor adults. In addition to the loss of family identity by such things as divorce and remarriage, MKs may live much of their lives thousands of miles from their extended families, seeing them only rarely. In addition to the loss of community identity caused by urbanization and bussing, MKs may live in a different "home" each time they come to their "home" country. And in addition to the loss of religious identity due to denominations and independent churches, MKs may be confused by national religions.
- Sexuality. The very definition of adolescence means that teenagers are not able to express their sexuality in a marriage relationship. They cannot legally be married (without parental consent) for about the first six years of their sexual maturity and cannot financially afford to for about the first ten years. Unfortunately, this is during the young men's time of greatest sexual desire. Of course, we know that most teenagers in Western cultures are not sexually inactive. MKs may grow up in host cultures that are even more sexually permissive than their "home" country as well as in missionary subcultures that are less sexually permissive. This may result in even more difficulty dealing with their sexuality during adolescence.
- Work. Teenagers worked for thousands of years, but full-time work that pays enough to live on was legally prohibited for most people before the age of 18 with the invention of adolescence. Since they could not work, our culture passed laws that adolescents must

go to school, although many teens now work part-time. MKs often have even more limited opportunities to work, earn money, and learn how to spend it than teens back home.

Can adolescence be “treated?”

Western culture may someday find that it cannot support adolescence, and gradually decrease it. However, for the present time, we have to live in this culture with adolescence. The only “cure” for adolescence now is to grow older and become an adult.

Can adolescence problems be prevented?

Problems in adolescence can at least be greatly decreased. The major way to help those going through adolescence is to treat them as adults. Expect responsible behavior from them and teach them to be adults. Parents can take many specific actions to help with all three major problem areas. Here are a few examples.

Identity. Help teens develop an identity:

- Family. Have family nights, family outings, family traditions, family jokes, family devotions, family scrapbooks and videos. Study the family history.
- Mission community. Participate in school activities, church activities, dinners, retreats, outings, etc. with others in the mission. Have a positive attitude about it.
- “Home” community. When in the home country, participate in scouts, 4-H, PTO, block parties, etc. Subscribe to the local paper and read about the local history.
- Religious. Adolescents should participate as adults in the choir, ushering, teaching,

leading Bible study, participating in board meetings, leading small groups, etc.

Sexuality. Talk with teens about sex.

- Talk about sexuality and adolescence so that the adolescents will realize the problem is with Western culture, not with them as individuals. Begin doing this when they are children.
- Study what the Bible has to say about the various types of sexual activity in which adolescents engage, and look at all the positive things the Bible has to say about sex.
- Begin interacting with the opposite sex in acceptable ways. Dating is a time of becoming friends and developing commitment, not becoming sexual partners.
- Make a commitment during the early teen years about what the teen will do and will not do in terms of sexual behavior (hold hands, embrace, pet, premarital sex, etc.)

Work and Money. Teach teens about finances.

- Everyone given a job to do to help around the house and grounds, without pay.
- Teens work extra jobs to earn their own money to spend as they see fit, to learn how to manage money.
- Give teens the money you would use to buy their own necessities (clothing, toiletries, etc.) as their weekly or monthly pay, just as you are paid. It is then their responsibility to manage that money so they will have new clothes for school. If they do not have it, let them wear their old ones.

Although there will almost certainly be times of conflict, in general adolescence can be a time of growth for both parents and teenagers.

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