

Child Development & Separation ADOLESCENCE

(12-18 years)



Cognitive Development

- The young adolescent can think and reason abstractly, and can recognize complex causes of events.
- The youth is able to understand perspectives other than his own. Some youth have developed insight and may recognize that their parents have problems which contributed to the need for placement.
- The child has the cognitive ability to understand complex reasons for separation, placement, and family behavior.
- The youth's time perspective is more realistic.
- The youth can generalize experiences from one setting to another.
- The youth understands that rules often change depending upon the situation. The youth can more easily adapt his behavior to meet the expectations of different situations.
- The youth may have an increased ability to identify her own feelings and to communicate her concerns and distress verbally.
- The ability to be self-aware and insightful may be of help in coping with the situation and his conflicting feelings about it.
- The youth is more able to think hypothetically. He can use this ability to plan for the future and to consider potential outcomes of different strategies.

Emotional Development

- Self-esteem is strongly affected by how well she does in her daily activities, including academic performance and play activities.
- She is anxious when she does not have structure and when she does not understand the "rules" or expectations of a new situation.
- The child's primary identification is with her family and her self-esteem is tied to people's perception of her family's worth.

Social Development

- The youth's social world has expanded to include many people outside the family.
- Peers are extremely important. Most peer relationships are of same-sex.
- In early adolescents opposite sex friendships exist, but unless the child has been prematurely introduced to sexuality, these are of no special interest or concern.
- The young adolescent still needs trusted adults for leadership, support, nurturance, and approval.
- They can begin to understand that their parents have the capacity to do wrong.
- The youth may be embarrassed to admit her need for adult approval.
- The youth is status conscious. Much of the child's self-esteem is derived from peer group acceptance and from being in the "right" peer group.
- The youth may need to keep up appearances and defend her family to others.
- The youth is becoming aware of social roles, and she experiments with different roles and behaviors.
- Although many youth will have developed a moral attitude with clearly defined "rights" and "wrongs," values of the peer group often supersede their own.
- For older adolescents, opposite-sex relationships are as important as same-sex relationships. Individual relationships are becoming more important.
- The youth is very interested in adults as role models.
- The older youth is beginning to focus on future planning and emancipation.
- Toward the end of middle adolescence, many youth may begin to question previously held beliefs and ideas regarding "right" and "wrong," and they may be less influenced by peer attitudes. An emergence of independent ethical thinking may be evident.

Implications for Separation and Placement

- The youth has an increased ability to understand the reasons for the separation. With help, the youth may be able to develop a realistic perception of the situation and avoid unnecessary self-blame.
- The youth can benefit from supportive adult intervention, such as casework counseling, to help sort through his feelings about the situation.
- If given permission, the youth may be able to establish relationships with caregivers without feeling disloyal to his parents.
- The youth may be embarrassed and self-conscious regarding his family's problems and his foster care status, which may contribute to low self-esteem and self-efficacy.

- The youth may be worried about his family as a unit and may demonstrate considerable concern for siblings and parents.
- It may be difficult to replace "best friends" in the foster care setting. The youth may be lonely and isolated.
- Young adolescents may be preoccupied with fantasies of returning to earlier attachment figures (primary parents, kin, or earlier foster caregivers). These fantasies can interfere with the youth's successful attachment and adjustment in his new home.
- Early adolescence is an emotionally chaotic period. Any additional stress has the potential of creating "stress overload" and may precipitate crisis.
- The youth may resist relationships with adults. Dependence upon adults threatens her "independence". By rejecting adults, the youth deprives herself of an important source of coping support.
- The youth may deny much of her discomfort and pain which prevents her from constructively coping with these feelings.
- Separation from parents, especially if the result of family conflict and unruly behavior on the part of the youth, may generate guilt and anxiety.
- Identity is an emerging issue; dealing with her parents' shortcomings is difficult. Parents may be idealized, shortcomings may be denied or they may be verbally criticized, and rejected.
- Entry into sexual relationships may be very frightening without the support of a consistent, understanding adult.
- The child has the capacity to participate in planning and to make suggestions regarding her own life.
- Persistent, repeated attempts to engage the child by a caseworker can have very positive results. The youth may greatly benefit from the support and guidance of the caseworker.
- Relationships with peers are tremendously important to young adolescents, and they may run away from the foster home to be close to them.
- Young adolescents may feel they are unable to "fit in" to their new social environments, especially if there are obvious cultural differences between him and his peers. This can result in considerable anxiety, and sometimes, depression. The adolescent's cultural identity formation may be compromised. These issues also affect later stages of adolescent development.
- Cultural differences between the young teen's previous home and the foster home (such as expectations regarding dress, language, choice of friends, dating, and level of independence) may affect the success of the young teen's placement. The substitute caregiver and caseworker should talk openly with the teen about these differences

and develop methods of helping the teen feel "at home" and comfortable in his new setting. These issues also affect later stages of adolescent development.

- The youth will probably experience ambivalence about his family. With help and reassurance that ambivalence is normal, the child may be able to accept his feelings and be able to be angry at and love his family at the same time.
- The youth's need for independence may affect his response to placement in a family setting. He may be unwilling to accept the substitute family as more than a place to stay. This may be perceived as the child's failure to "adjust" to the placement, even though it is a healthy and expectable response.
- The youth may not remain in a placement if it does not meet his needs.
- The youth may constructively use casework counseling to deal with the conflicts of separation and placement in a way that meets the youth's needs without threatening his self-esteem and independence.