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Developmentally appropriate counseling for early adolescents

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Developmentally appropriate counseling for early adolescents

Abstract

The middle school years have been labeled a turning point, and for good reason. Children in the early adolescent stage, normally considered to be ages 11 to 14, are at a developmental crossroads, which makes this a critical period for their future life course (Elias & Branden-Muller, 1994). Their bodies undergo more changes during this stage of development than at any other time in their life, except infancy (Vernon, 1993). In addition to this they are experiencing drastic hormonal, pubertal, emotional and social changes as well. How young adolescents cope with the many challenges they have to face during this period will play an important role in the type of person they will become as adults. Their choices are often guided by what they value, which in turn dictates how they choose to live their lives. These lifestyle choices will become more and more integrated into their adult personality (Mauk & Taylor, 1993).

**DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE COUNSELING FOR EARLY
ADOLESCENTS**

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The middle school years have been labeled a turning point, and for good reason. Children in the early adolescent stage, normally considered to be ages 11 to 14 , are at a developmental crossroads, which makes this a critical period for their future life course (Elias & Branden-Muller, 1994). Their bodies undergo more changes during this stage of development than at any other time in their life, except infancy (Vernon, 1993). In addition to this they are experiencing drastic hormonal, pubertal, emotional and social changes as well. How young adolescents cope with the many challenges they have to face during this period will play an important role in the type of person they will become as adults. Their choices are often guided by what they value, which in turn dictates how they choose to live their lives. These lifestyle choices will become more and more integrated into their adult personality (Mauk & Taylor, 1993).

During this time, middle schoolers also begin to gradually develop the cognitive ability to think abstractly, giving them a newfound awareness that what they do or fail to do today may have an effect on their lives as adults. While they are faced with many challenges, the consequences of these challenges can have a lasting effect on their lives. How they cope during this time is often dependant upon skills and resources that they have not yet developed. For this reason, middle school

students desperately need guidance and support (Stewart, 1993). Prevention and intervention at the beginning of the adolescent years can be the key to a productive and healthy life.

In addition to the usual physiological, emotional and social changes, our society hands these adolescent students yet another challenge: transitioning from elementary to middle school. For most young adolescents the shift from elementary to junior high or middle school means moving from a small neighborhood school and the stability of one classroom, to a larger, more impersonal setting (Jackson & Hornbeck, 1989).

Research on the development of early adolescence generally does not include an analysis of the influence of schooling on the developmental process. Most of the information focuses on psychodynamic factors, cognitive development, and social relationships. While there is little doubt about the importance of these factors in shaping the early adolescent, it is also apparent that the school setting is a key component in the developmental process (Leming, 1985). According to Leming, the participation of the school in the development of the adolescent is inevitable. The question is whether or not schools will positively or negatively affect development.

The special needs of early adolescents calls for guidance services tailored to meet their needs (Mauk & Taylor, 1993).

However, given the high student-to-counselor ratios, it seems an impossible job for the counselor alone. In most schools the ratio of students-to-counselors often results in a situation in which only a few students-"those dying from affective thirst" (Mauk & Taylor, 1993, p. 6)-find their way to the counselor's office. Meeting the needs of this small group of students is not enough. All middle school students are in need of support and guidance during this important time. Therefore it is essential that counselors work together with other school personnel to meet the unique needs of the middle school student.

The purpose of this paper is to examine ways in which the school counselor and teaching staff can work together to meet the affective needs of all middle school students. The developmental process of middle schoolers will be reviewed, and implications for the counselor and other school personnel will be discussed. Finally, suggestions for developmentally appropriate techniques and interventions will be addressed.

Developmental Theory of Early Adolescence

Eisner (1984) claims that although educational theory should inform educational practice, it rarely does. It is partially the school counselor's job to see to it that this connection takes place. In order for school counselors to meet the developmental needs of students, they must be familiar

with the normal developmental process of adolescents (Johnson & Kottman, 1992). They must also be prepared to use this information when designing an appropriate curriculum for this unique age group.

Following is a brief overview of the developmental changes *that early adolescents will most likely experience*. However, it is important to keep in mind that this process of change is unique to each individual, and developmental theory is only a general guideline (Johnson & Kottman, 1992).

Physical Development

For both males and females, early adolescence is a time of physical transformation. Many sexual characteristics, both primary and secondary, develop for the first time (Blyth & Monroe-Traeger, 1983). These changes in the body will also influence the adolescents' view of themselves. Their degree of satisfaction and concern about these changes can have a strong effect on their self-esteem, causing "locker room phobia" and other discomforts (Vernon, 1993).

Physical development varies a great deal from adolescent to adolescent, which can also affect their social and emotional development. Those who mature early seem to be more socially mature, self-confident and athletic, while those maturing more slowly tend to lag behind in these areas (Vernon, 1993).

Self-Development

The newly found cognitive abilities of early adolescents allow them to redefine themselves, questioning previous beliefs about themselves and their world (Smulyan, 1986). They seem preoccupied with their appearance and may try on different roles and patterns of behavior (Elias & Branden-Muller, 1994). They often appear to be moody and unpredictable. This behavior can be understood as an attempt to grapple with what they have done thus far in their lives, their understanding of their present circumstances, and their perspectives on the future.

Early adolescents are also very self-conscious. They are overly sensitive to the reactions of others (real or imagined), and base much of their opinion of themselves upon what they think this "imaginary audience" thinks of them (Vernon, 1993). All of this can make them very ill at ease in social situations, and can result in a decrease in self-esteem (Baumrind, 1987).

Social Development

There is no doubt that peer relationships begin to increase in importance and influence during the early adolescent years (Elias & Branden-Muller, 1994). In their search for greater autonomy and independence, adolescents tend to separate from the parent figure as they bond with their peers. This does not mean that parents' and teachers' influence is diminished, but

that adolescents are less likely to admit to, or acknowledge the adults' influence (Elias & Branden-Muller, 1994).

Since adolescents are so sensitive to the "imaginary audience" they tend to choose peers who are most like themselves, and to replicate each others' behaviors, speech and dress (Vernon, 1993). It is this need for peer approval that can often lead to problem behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse or risky sexual practices. Research shows that problem behaviors such as these, if manifested early, tend to persist in later life (Hamburg ,1990). Conversely, early abstinence is a strong predictor of later healthy behavior.

As adolescents become more social, they begin to construct more ways of doing things. This creates situations in which their new socialization is in conflict with their earlier belief system. These challenges may cause them to question authority and may, at times, be the trigger to what has sometimes been seen as defiant behavior (Thornburg, 1983).

Cognitive Development

Early adolescence is a time of cognitive awakening (Elias & Branden-Muller, 1994). Adolescents gradually acquire the ability to think abstractly, shifting from concrete to formal operational thinking (Vernon, 1993). Adolescents move from thinking in terms of specifics to being able to consider ideas, rules, and relationships that are more general and abstract.

They begin to develop a more global viewpoint, tuning in for the first time to societal concerns, and are increasingly more aware of how their present will affect their future. At this age they also tend to evaluate themselves and others by comparing their reality to rather idealistic standards. However, because this change takes place very slowly over time, and there is a wide variation from child to child in the rate of development of their cognitive abilities, adults need to use an especially individualized approach when working with students of this age.

Emotional Development

Adolescents' emotional states seem to vary a lot, causing moodiness and apathy. These emotional changes are due in part to the hormonal roller coaster ride that they are physiologically experiencing. In addition, their new cognitive abilities allow them to recognize the difference between the real and ideal, their expectations and their reality. This often causes disappointment and emotional reactions (Vernon, 1993). Their new patterns of thought may also lead them to experience some new emotions such as guilt, shame, anxiety, depression, and anger. Males and females may respond differently to these negative feelings. While young females are more emotionally expressive (Vernon, 1993), young males tend to keep their feelings to themselves. Girls are more

likely to experience shame, guilt and depression, while boys may experience more anger.

Implications for Schools

Early adolescence, especially in the United States, is a time of great change. Along with all the individual transformations addressed above, children also experience dramatic shifts in their school environment (Jackson & Hornbeck, 1989). In theory, middle schools were developed in the late 1950's to respond to the unique developmental needs of this age group. In reality however, middle schools are often merely a reorganization of grades to help solve problems such as over crowding (Jackson & Hornbeck, 1989).

According to Jones (1981), changing school structures, moving into an unfamiliar environment, reorganizing peer groups, and moving from a self-contained classroom in which all subjects are taught, to changing classrooms and instructors 7 to 9 times per day can have a negative effect on adolescents' self-esteem. It is the responsibility of the school to make this transition as smooth as possible, while concurrently helping adolescents handle the other social, emotional, and physiological changes they are experiencing. It has long been recognized that more is taught and learned in schools than what exists in lesson plans, textbooks and tests

(Leming, 1985). Mauk & Taylor (1993) suggest that for schools to become more effective, they must become more affective.

In far too many schools a developmental mismatch exists resulting from classroom and school environments that are at odds with the physiological, psychological and cognitive changes being experienced by early adolescents (Jackson & Hornbeck, 1989). Fundamental changes in the roles of school personnel, curriculum and overall school focus are necessary to meet the unique needs of adolescents.

An Integrated Guidance Curriculum

All adolescents in this developmental period need guidance services as they move through this critical time in their lives (Mauk & Taylor, 1993). However, because there are generally too many students and too few counselors, a school-wide integrated guidance curriculum is needed to support students throughout this developmental process. The term integrated guidance curriculum implies that it is collaborative in nature, involving the entire staff in its implementation. Everything from classroom guidance to the school dance should be a part of the middle school's affective education program.

McEwin (1983) notes that although the importance of having the classroom teacher provide classroom guidance has been recognized for many years, in practice this role has been left to the counselor and largely neglected by the remainder of

the faculty. In an effort to enlist the involvement and cooperation of the teaching staff, the counselor can provide in-service education activities to help teachers acquire basic counseling skills. The counselor can also work together with the staff to develop the affective classroom curriculum. The counselor then acts as facilitator as teachers put their training to use in the actual classroom (Stewart, 1993). By utilizing the teachers' teaching skills to present the classroom guidance material, counselors are then free to use their time and specialized skills for implementing the individual and small group portion of the affective curriculum. The teacher, while not replacing the guidance counselor, plays an important role in the success of an integrated guidance program, to which the counselor serves as consultant, facilitator and resource person.

The guidance curriculum should be proactive in nature and designed to address three areas: the personal/social, career/vocational and educational development of the students. The personal/social domain should address issues such as self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, problem solving and behavior management, and feelings. The career/vocational area would assist students in beginning to explore possible long term career goals, and the educational

realm should help students to develop better study skills and encourage a positive attitude toward learning.

Butte (1993) contends that school personnel also need to be aware of the causes of student stress, and to build their curriculum around this information. She suggests that the counselor help the teaching staff develop units addressing student needs such as time management, problem solving, and conflict resolution. In addition, students should be taught and encouraged to use cognitive restructuring skills such as how to dispute irrational thinking. To be effective these skills not only need to be taught in the classroom guidance lesson, but also reinforced in other academic and extra-curricular areas.

Overall School Focus

Elias and Branden-Muller (1994) contend that the adolescents' success in the adult world is no less dependent on their academic ability than it is on what are being described as their interpersonal, intrapersonal, or practical intelligence. The school as a whole needs to work to build and maintain a positive school climate, they also need to hire and train personnel to be informed and sensitive to the middle schoolers' special developmental needs.

Social Needs. According to McEwin, social experiences at the middle school level should be carefully planned around the early adolescent's developmental needs, and not simply

emulate the senior high. For example, when adolescents are prematurely put into situations requiring advanced social skills (such as at a school dance) before they are developmentally ready, problems can result. Although they may be physically or cognitively prepared for the situation, they may not be socially ready to handle it. When youth are put in this predicament, there is a greater potential for inner conflict (Thornburg, 1983).

Schools need to remember these young people are experiencing dramatic and often traumatic adjustments to new and unfamiliar social roles. Emphasizing overly sophisticated and highly competitive activities such as proms and interscholastic athletics can add to the students' stress. While holding a school dance may be appropriate for some at this age, others may not be as socially mature. Therefore, offering options such as a movie, or intramural tournament at the school dance would provide an outlet for those adolescents not yet developmentally ready for a "date".

Early adolescents need to be gradually introduced to situations requiring progressively advanced social skills. In a study by Jones (1981), a relationship between students' social skills, feelings of anonymity and self-esteem was found. This research suggests that adolescents who possess a sense of being "known" exhibit higher self-esteem. Students who had

higher self-esteem also possessed more advanced social skills which enabled them to pursue relationships, thereby reducing their perceptions of anonymity.

School Climate. The climate of the classroom is very important in supporting the development of the adolescent. Leming (1985) maintains that most schools are undemocratic. Furthermore, Leming's research suggests that school environments characterized as undemocratic and authoritarian may result in feelings of alienation and powerlessness for the students, which is exactly the opposite of the early adolescents' goals. To the contrary, democratic and open environments may positively influence youths' attitudes, feelings and social integration. The counselor can help establish a democratic environment by offering inservice training to keep the staff informed about democratic methods such as cooperative learning and how to improve classroom climate through the guidance curriculum.

Sensitive Personnel. It is essential that teachers as well as other significant adults better prepare themselves for effective interaction with early adolescents (Thornburg, 1983). Very few teachers at the middle school level have been prepared specifically for teaching students from this age group (McEwin, 1983). In a survey of more than 500 teacher education institutions, Alexander and McEwin (1982) found

that only 30 percent had middle school/junior high teacher preparation programs. Special middle level training for principals and other administrative personnel was also almost nonexistent. In order to understand early adolescent behavior it is critical that educators learn as much about the basic characteristics of early adolescence as possible.

Thornburg (1983) posits that one major limitation of teacher effectiveness in dealing with adolescents is their failure to deal with their overall developmental nature. Jones (1981) research suggests that one of the most important roles of the teaching staff is to provide adolescents with the opportunity to develop a sense of self esteem by encouraging them to work with others, such as in cooperative learning settings, and by promoting their participation in activities that create social interaction such as extra-curricular activities.

Teachers need to be aware of the adolescents increased sensitivity to the 'imaginary audience' and make allowances for this (Vernon, 1993). For example, having to undress in front of their peers in Physical Education class or stand up and give a speech in English can be devastating to students at this age. Teachers can help by being patient and encouraging, changing policies about dressing in physical education, and utilizing small groups to dispel the anxiety of giving a speech

in front of a large class. Teachers need to make every effort to show interest in their individual students as people. They can accomplish this by calling them by name, asking about their social lives, and showing respect for their opinions.

Students should also be allowed independence in learning activities to encourage autonomy according to Manning & Allen (1987), and to be involved to some degree in establishing policies and rules in the classroom. Giving young people opportunities such as these can be a very helpful step toward the development of social skills, which has a strong positive influence on their self concept.

The Counselors' Role

If middle school counselors are to be seen as effective professionals, they need to clearly define their professional role in the school. In a survey given to middle and junior high school principals and counselors (Bonebrake and Borgers, 1984), the following five areas were listed as the least important roles of the school counselor: a) research b) functioning as a principal c) supervision of the lunchroom d) discipline e) teaching non-guidance classes. Despite this, administrators and teachers frequently expect the counselor to provide these functions. Furthermore, while the survey indicates that principals seem to appreciate middle school counselors, they also sometimes expect them to provide

inappropriate administrative assistance. Middle school counselors need to be able to clearly define their role and firmly defend their objections to participating in activities such as lunch duty, substitute teaching and recess duty (Mauk & Taylor, 1993).

In order to provide the most effective and efficient guidance program, the counselor should serve as coordinator of the school guidance program, utilizing the teaching staffs skills to implement the curriculum where possible. By doing this they free themselves to use their specialized skills in the more demanding areas of individual and group counseling, as well as consultation with teachers and parents.

Individual Counseling. Early adolescents can benefit from individual counseling. Due to the physiological, emotional, and social changes they are going through, even the most 'normal' early adolescents may need assistance. Because students of this age have not yet fully developed their abstract thinking skills, they tend to over generalize or to blow situations out of proportion, which leads to irrational thinking. Common concerns at this age are: getting along with peers, their rate of physical development, how to manage strong emotions, developing a positive self concept, dealing with irrational thoughts, and sexual concerns, to name a few. Students of this

age need to be educated that the changes they are experiencing, as well as their fears and concerns, are normal for their age.

Counselors need to give careful consideration to their choice of interventions. They should take into account the developmental characteristics of the adolescent and plan accordingly, keeping in mind the student's need for movement, their cognitive level of development, their interests, and the presenting problem or need. Younger adolescents will likely be more concrete in their thinking. Due to their inclination to over generalize and awfulize, they are frequently plagued by irrational thoughts. By teaching them to recognize and dispute these irrational thoughts, many of their fears and concerns can be alleviated.

Another important consideration are the likes, dislikes and interests of the students. Their newfound interest in their self-development lends itself well to activities such as story writing, poetry, and journaling (Vernon, 1993). Most adolescents also have a love of music, and this can be very helpful when designing interventions. They can write song lyrics of their own which address issues they may be struggling with such as peer relationships or self identity, or they may merely analyze an existing song dealing with their topic of concern.

Since their cognitive abilities are growing, adolescents have a greater capacity to deal in the abstract than do younger children. Many are able to discuss hypothetical situations and can relate their lives to stories and books. For this reason, bibliotherapy as well as video media are sometimes very good techniques to use with early adolescents.

Group Counseling. It is extremely beneficial to help students of this age normalize their experiences and feelings (Vernon, 1993). One of the most important values to early adolescents is being accepted by their peers. For this reason, participation in counseling groups with peers can be very productive. Adolescents benefit from sharing fears, concerns, likes and dislikes with each other, and discovering that other students of their age feel much the same as they do. While counseling groups and classroom guidance discussions can provide the environment for this type of interaction, small groups are best because they allow more opportunity for the student to talk and be active (Johnson & Kottman, 1993). Groups should be designed to address the normal developmental concerns of students from this age group such as developing a positive self concept, friendship issues, getting along with parents and other adults, and managing strong emotions.

Many individual counseling interventions are also appropriate and effective in small groups. Music, for example,

can be listened to and discussed in a group. Adolescents might also enjoy composing a rap together about one of their mutual issues. Group bibliotherapy, using an appropriate reading selection, can also be quite effective. As with interventions in individual counseling, the likes, dislikes and developmental characteristics of the students should be considered when selecting an intervention for group use.

Kottman (1990) says that the therapeutic use of stories and metaphors is particularly effective with junior high and middle school students because it capitalizes on several characteristic developmental attitudes and behaviors. By communicating through metaphors and stories students can express threatening emotions and thoughts with a minimum amount of personal risk. This is very important because one of the primary motivations of early adolescence is to avoid feeling embarrassed or exposed to the 'imaginary audience'.

Role play is also a good technique to use in groups of this age. Through role-play the adolescent can learn more about his or her own values, beliefs, reactions, feelings, and behaviors as well as understanding the values, beliefs, reactions, feelings, and behaviors of others (Kottman, 1990).

Consultant to Teachers and Parents. Dougherty (1995) states that there are far more students needing assistance with personal and educational concerns than can be managed by

the school counselor. Consequently there is a strong need for consultation services. Through consultation, the consultant has the potential to positively affect more students than would be the case when working with individual students (Dougherty, 1995). For example, in Adlerian theory a heavy emphasis is placed on preventative interventions conducted by the school counselor as he or she offers training and education to parents and teachers. By teaching parents and teachers specific Adlerian techniques such as encouragement, social interest, and how to determine the goal of the child's behavior, the counselor is not only able to interrupt the negative cycle of interaction that has been controlling that specific child/parent or student/teacher relationship (Dustin & Ehly, 1992) but the teacher and parent(s) have new found skills they can use in their relationships with their other students or offspring.

School counselors can help the faculty by providing in-service programs to the entire staff on topics such as the developmental characteristics of the middle schooler, building a democratic atmosphere in the classroom, using behavioral strategies appropriate for early adolescents, and recognizing and disputing irrational thinking, to name only a few (Dougherty, 1995).

As a consultant to the faculty, the counselor can also work with individual teachers in a collaborative way to identify the goals of the child's behavior and design interventions to meet that specific child's developmental needs. It might also be helpful to organize a Student Teacher Assistance Team (STAT) to plan developmentally appropriate interventions for students who are exhibiting various types of difficulties, whether academic, behavioral, or both. Groups such as these not only help teachers deal more effectively with the "target" students, but they provide an educational tool to the teachers, helping them learn to recognize and deal with normal developmental issues when working with other students in the future.

School counselors are also frequently in a position to consult with parents. Counselors should serve as coordinator and teacher of parent education classes and support groups. While these groups are designed to educate parents specifically on normal developmental issues of the early adolescent, they also offer support and understanding from others experiencing similar problems.

In addition, counselors can consult with parents on an individual basis, working collaboratively with them to discuss problems unique to their adolescent. Often these are normal developmental problems and the parent will benefit greatly by being educated about the specifics of normal early adolescent

development. Parent consultation might also be initiated by the counselor as a result of working with an adolescent in a counseling setting. Parent consultation typically involves listening to concerns, educating parents about the normal developmental expectations of early adolescence, and exploring alternatives available to them (Mathias, 1992).

Conclusion

Elias and Branden-Muller (1994) likened the education of adolescents to a ship at sea:

Thus on the voyage to academic excellence we must not lose the child as a person. The middle school years represent a particularly tricky set of currents and choppy seas, during which many students can get thrown overboard. Unlike students during the elementary school years, they are not being watched so vigilantly that their departure are always noticed immediately. Unlike students during high school years, they often lack the wherewithal to get the attention of the captain and crew, or to somehow clamber back onto the boat. We must equip the S.S. Middle School with hand-holds throughout, and guard rails and life-lines around the ship, with the latter extending far into the sea for those who do fall overboard (pp. 6 & 7).

It is the responsibility of middle school counselors to help early adolescents through these turbulent years. By working

with the administration and teaching staff, counselors can make this time of transition to middle school as smooth as possible.

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