

The Five Developmental Tasks of Adolescence

In order to understand what it is about adolescence that makes parents tear out their hair, bite their nails, and lose their tempers, we need to understand fully the psychological purposes and functions of this important phase of development. Throughout these years, your adolescent is struggling to accomplish five significant (and, usually, sequential) tasks before he can move on as an adult in the world.

1. *Separating from old ties.* Each and every adolescent must be capable of making his way in the world *without his parents*. To do this he must begin to see you as real people with both strengths and weaknesses, and use his new perceptions to lessen your influence over him and develop his own sense of power. (This process of letting you step down from your childhood pedestal is as essential to your adolescent's growth as it is painful for you to experience.)

2. *Creating new attachments.* As your adolescent separates from you and your power, an emotional space opens up that can make him feel sad and empty for a while. But this space is necessary to his growth, because it also leaves room for him to form peer attachments with members of his own generation. These attachments will go on to provide him with lasting love and companionship, way after you are gone. Without this capacity, *you* would remain the love of his life; no one else could ever compare to you, and your adolescent would never be able to become an autonomous adult, capable of creating his own life.

3. *Establishing a mature sexual identity and a mature sexual life.* While your child has been experiencing romantic and sexual feelings all throughout childhood (remember when he told you he wanted to marry you when he grew up?), it is not until adolescence that he begins to crystallize fully his sense of himself as a sexual being, and it is not until this phase of development that homosexual or heterosexual choices in love become fully defined. In adolescence, your teenager begins to pursue love for the first time, *outside the family circle*, and becomes capable, for the first time, of expressing this love through the uses of his mature body.

4. *Formulating new ideas and new ideals.* As your adolescent becomes more autonomous, he must also reexamine your parental standards. He has absorbed and internalized these standards throughout his childhood, and they form the core of his conscience and inform his values. But now he may challenge what he has learned from you, and new ideas derived from his peer and social affiliations may be used to develop his sense of what is worthwhile in the world.

5. *Consolidating character.* This overarching developmental task integrates aspects of the four previous tasks I've outlined. In order for your adolescent's character to become consolidated, he must have been able to separate from you, achieve some degree of confidence in himself as an independent agent in the world, develop his own ideas and ideals, and establish a loving, sexual life with a partner. When your adolescent has been able to achieve all of this, his own character will become more consolidated, and he will be able to function as a capable and productive adult.