Adapted from The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development

http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-adolescent-health/_includes/Interactive%20Guide.pdf

Chapter 3: Emotional & Social Development

Although the stereotype of adolescence emphasizes emotional outbursts and mood swings, in truth, the teen years are a quest for emotional and social competence.

Emotional competence is the ability to perceive, assess, and manage one’s own emotions. Social competence is the capacity to be sensitive and effective in relating to other people. [...] development in the adolescent brain gives teens increasing capacity to manage their emotions and relate well to others.

Unlike the physical changes of puberty, emotional and social development is not an inevitable biological process during adolescence. Society expects that young people will learn to prevent their emotions from interfering with performance and relate well to other people, but this does not occur from brain development alone—it must be cultivated.

Four areas of emotional and social development

[...] through relating to others, you gain insights into yourself. The skills necessary for managing emotions and successful relationships have been called “emotional intelligence” and include self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and the ability to get along with others and make friends.

Self-awareness: What do I feel?

Self-awareness centers on young people learning to recognize and name their emotions. Feelings cannot be labeled accurately unless conscious attention is paid to them, and that involves going deeper than saying one feels “good,” “bad,” or the all-purpose “OK.” [...]

Social awareness: What do other people feel?

While it is vital that youth recognize their own emotions, they must also develop empathy and take into account the feelings of others. Understanding the thoughts and feelings of others and appreciating the value of human differences are the cornerstones of social awareness.

Cognitive development during adolescence may make social awareness difficult for some young people. Adolescents actually read emotions through a different part of the brain than do adults. Dr. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd, director of Neuropsychology and Cognitive Neuroimaging at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, took magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans of the brains of both teenagers and adults as they were shown images of faces that clearly expressed fear. All the adults correctly identified fear. About half of the teens got it wrong, mistaking the expression as that of shock, sadness, or confusion.
Yurgelun-Todd discovered that on the MRI scans of the adults, both the limbic area of the brain (the part of the brain linked to emotions) and the prefrontal cortex (connected to judgment and reasoning) were lit up. When teens saw the same images, the limbic area was bright, but there was almost no activity in the prefrontal cortex. Until the prefrontal cortex fully develops in early adulthood, teens may misinterpret body language and facial expressions. Adults can help by telling teens how they are feeling. For example, a parent can say, “I’m not mad at you, just tired and crabby.”

**Self-management: How can I control my emotions?**

Self-management is monitoring and regulating one’s emotions and establishing and working toward positive goals. Adolescents can experience intense emotions with puberty. Researchers have found that the increase of testosterone in both boys and girls at puberty literally swells the amygdala, an area of the brain associated with social acceptance, responses to reward, and emotions, especially fear.

Nonetheless, adolescents can and do learn to manage their emotions. Self-management in a young person involves using developing reasoning and abstract thinking skills to step back, examine emotions, and consider how those emotions bear on longer-term goals. By actively managing emotions rather than reacting to a flood of feelings, young people can learn to avoid the pitfalls and problems that strong emotions often evoke. Recognizing that they have the power to choose how to react in a situation can greatly improve the way adolescents experience that situation.

**Peer relationships: How can I make and keep friends?**

Social and emotional development depends on establishing and maintaining healthy, rewarding relationships based on cooperation, effective communication, and the ability to resolve conflict and resist inappropriate peer pressure.

These social skills are fostered by involvement in a peer group, and teens generally prefer to spend increasing amounts of time with fellow adolescents and less time with family. Peers provide a new opportunity for young people to form necessary social skills and an identity outside the family.

The influence of peers is normal and expected. Peers have significant sway on day-to-day values, attitudes, and behaviors in relation to school, as well as tastes in clothing and music. Peers also play a central role in the development of sexual identities and the formation of intimate friendships and romantic relationships.

Emerging brain science indicates that during early adolescence social acceptance by peers may be processed by the brain similarly to other pleasurable rewards, such as receiving money or eating ice cream. This makes social acceptance highly desirable and helps explain why adolescents change their behavior to match their peers’. Teens often adopt the styles, values, and interests of the group to maintain an identity that distinguishes their group from other students.

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Commented [MG5]: This section is pointing out that teens and adults read emotions with different parts of the brain. Think about a time when you didn’t understand an adult (or an adult didn’t understand you). How did this miscommunication feel? Frustrating? Upsetting?

Commented [MG6]: Ask your “the theory” teammates about The Ten Tasks of Adolescence. How does developing abstract thinking skills help manage emotions?

Commented [MG7]: I know many, many, MANY adults who struggle at this.

Commented [MG8]: Do your friends change how you feel about school? Would you have a different opinion about doing work if your friend group were the opposite of what it is now? (Ex: if your current group of friends dislikes school, what would change if your friends loved going to class?)

Commented [MG9]: If you’re adopting an identity so that you can belong to a group, is that still a true identity?

Commented [MG10]: DON’T FORGET: Write at least three bullet points with key information from this article in your concept map.

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