

The Minds and Hearts of Adolescents

by James B. Stenson



Adolescence is an immensely important time of life. Experience with forming young people shows that the habits formed, the friends made, and the ideals enkindled during adolescence all have lifelong consequences. Pope John Paul II has compared the time of youth to the switching yard of a railroad terminal: just as the small flicking motion of a few switches will determine the course of a train's journey and its final destination, so, too, those few critical choices made during adolescence—commitment to a moral life, internalized spirituality, the call to marriage or celibacy, the pursuit of a career—will determine the course of one's life.

Because we strive to help form the minds and hearts of adolescent boys (young men, really), leading them to the choices that build responsible Christian adulthood, it is worthwhile to consider some characteristic features of behavior and attitudes among people this age. The generalizations listed below derive from the experience of people who have worked closely with adolescent males. These views are, of course, opinionable and open to qualification; and, like most generalizations about people, they admit of exceptions in real life.

The term "adolescent" originally meant "young adult," and in former times this term was meant literally. That is, a young person over the age of 13 or 14 was considered an adult in most senses, capable of taking on significant adult-level responsibilities. Today in Western society, a male between 13 and 18 is considered and generally treated by society as a large child, a person with the powers of adulthood but the dependence and irresponsibility of childhood. In past eras, an adolescent would quickly take on adult-level responsibilities shortly after he grew during puberty to have the bodily and mental powers of adulthood, and the eager desire to exercise these powers and to grow up. Today these powers, and the psychological drives that naturally accompany them, have nowhere to go, no outlet for exercise; the result in many teenage males is boredom, restlessness, reckless hedonism, and certain tensions between themselves and responsible adults. (Boredom nearly always derives from having a power that is going unexercised—a strength of some kind that is steadily "on idle.")

The psychology of a male aged 13 to 18 is thus naturally directed toward discovering and exercising his powers, being accepted by his peers and adults as worthy of respect for his competence. Even the rough horseplay, reckless daring, desire to try new adventures, sensitivity to criticism, daydreaming about the future, delight in criticizing illogic or (perceived) hypocrisy among adults—all these attitudes and actions derive from the drive to grow up and

to be perceived as grown up. Young males have a drive to put their newfound powers, and those powers as yet undiscovered, to productive use. Unconsciously they long to be needed—and in fulfilling that need by their competence, to win everyone's respect.

Adolescence is a time for finding oneself and giving oneself wholeheartedly to some great ideal. An example here: In his biography of Alexander Hamilton, the historian James Thomas Flexner described what was happening in the mind of Hamilton as a teenager just beginning his career in New York. Flexner said that Hamilton was "moved by two opposite desires: to prove himself completely self-reliant, proudly independent of the outside world, and to merge his identity with some potent force outside himself." This he found in the cause for American independence.

For all these reasons, anyone who works with adolescent young men needs to maintain certain attitudes and approaches to dealing with them:

- Treat them like men in the making, not children. That is, treat them with respect, as you would any other adult. Respect their sensibilities and their rights, including their right to privacy and freedom of decision. Lead them, but don't try to boss them. By all means, come down to their level from time to time, as in games and sports and joining in their high spirits, but don't stay there. Come down for the sake of leading them back up to your own level as an adult who enjoys being an adult. Adolescent males respond very well to a self-confident adult who considers them to be adults who have everything but experience. Bear in mind, too, that almost no one else treats them this way.
- Lead them to think deeply about their future lives, including the adventure of their future responsibilities. Remember that all of them will someday have family responsibilities, whether married (as most will be) or dedicated to apostolic celibacy. Thus open their eyes to see how their present striving to develop themselves spiritually, intellectually, physically, professionally, and so on (the range of formation in our work with youth) is preparing them for great service to their future families, the Church, and society. Explain how their family, the Church, Christ Himself needs them, and needs them starting now. In other words, take their natural striving to grow up and direct it towards the highest ideals of manly Christian service. Give them a vision of their future lives as responsible heads of families and competent professionals, men who earn everyone's respect. Make clear to them that you think seriously about what kind of man each will be by the time he is in his 20's and 30's. (The rest of society, maybe including their parents, does not impart this vision; others who think of their future are thinking of what they will do, not what they will be—their careers rather than their character.)

- Be very patient. There is an inevitable amount of uncertainty and emotional instability among adolescents, caused partly by their body chemistry. Psychologists note that the odd-numbered years for boys (13, 15, 17) are periods of inward turning and sulkiness, mild (sometimes strong) melancholy and moodiness, flippancy, critical spirit toward authority, insecurity, a desire to be alone sometimes to daydream and think things over. By contrast, the even-numbered years are characterized by exuberance, gregariousness, eagerness to learn and experiment, high spirited risk-taking. Thus a teen who's cheerful and cooperative during freshman year of high school (age 14) may inexplicably seem withdrawn and touchy the following year, but then drift back during junior year, showing ups and downs in his emotional commitments. We have to understand this natural dynamic, live with it, give young people freedom, and maintain a steady willingness to be a friend no matter what. The more uncertain teenagers are—and uncertainty is the characteristic trait of adolescence—they more they need, and inwardly appreciate, our certain, steady, respectful friendship and our confidence in their future success as men.
- Give them outlets for their growing intellectual and moral powers. Lead them to excellent, thought-provoking reading, especially history and biography and apologetics, all to strengthen their judgment and firm up their consciences. Let athletics be a way for them to learn teamwork, fair play, sportsmanship, all to strengthen their virtues of responsibility, perseverance, and temperance (self-mastery). Involve them in making and executing plans for projects in the life of the center—so they can put their powers to productive use and thus grow in responsibility, being needed. Take them on visits to the poor, and involve them in teaching catechism, tutoring youngsters worse off than they—so they will grow in gratitude to God (the basis for all piety), generosity, practice in adult-level service to those in need.
- Always bear in mind the power of example. It is example and guided practice that will do most to form them in virtue, not just talks. Talks are only effective when they explain the reasons for what the teens perceive in our lives, in the life of the center. This means, among other things, that each person who works with them should be striving to live a virtuous life himself, to let the boys see how a responsible adult lives the seven great virtues of faith, hope, charity, sound judgment, responsibility, perseverance and self-mastery. The boys should see us enjoying ourselves and enjoying their company. They should see us as men who are serious of purpose but light in touch. What they should not see in us, ever, is childishness, frivolity, vulgarity, amateurish sloppiness, or an overeagerness to “impress” or amuse them. If they do perceive these things, they may be temporarily amused, but they will not respect us and eventually they will go away—for nobody respects a clown. Respect, along with God's grace, is everything. There is such a thing as healthy self-respect, and this they should perceive in us.

- Remember what Aristotle said about the formation of youth: Virtues cannot, strictly speaking, be taught; but they can be learned. Young people do not learn virtues in the abstract; what they do is unconsciously emulate virtuous adults whom they esteem. They are looking for a life to imitate. They do not ask themselves, "What rules should I live by?" Rather, they ask themselves, "Who lives a great life? Whom do I want to be like?"
- One note of experience: Adolescent males have powerful imaginations, and nature directs this power to make them alert to life-lessons in dramas all around them, including stories they hear. People of all ages enjoy and learn from stories that exercise the moral imagination. Thus adolescents are open to being formed through stories and anecdotes. So get-togethers, talks, meditations and homilies, conversations, any verbal discourse—should all have stories, anecdotes, examples that show the virtues being lived one way or another. Meditations should center on the gospels, making the dramas therein come alive for the boys. Talks should give examples from lives of heroic people, including the saints. All these are far more instructive and readily accepted than cognitive expositions of moral and doctrinal matters. Therefore, whoever plans talks or meditations should spend 90% of the preparation time in coming up with illustrative anecdotes and vivid, even humorous, examples. This sort of preparation should probably be done with all talks to any age group, but it is especially important and effective with adolescents.
- Among the intellectual powers that adolescents rapidly acquire is that of making abstract distinctions. Young children have fuzzy minds and tend to form judgments on the basis of emotions and self-interest. Teens, on the other hand, grow rapidly capable of forming abstract ideas and contrasting their meanings. This is one reason they like logical disputation and are fond of pouncing on lapses of logic in others' thinking. It's no accident that higher education in the Middle Ages centered on making distinctions and probing for logical fallacies. (See, for instance, the works of Thomas Aquinas.) Take advantage of this natural abstractive power to teach the great distinctions in life. Here are some important intellectual and moral distinctions that young people can and should internalize:
 - *needs* from *wants*
 - *objective* from *subjective*
 - *real grown-up life* from *life as depicted on t.v. and in movies*
 - *humor* and *wit* from *mean-spirited ridicule*
 - the *noble* and *beautiful* from the *sordid* and *squalid*
 - *responsible spirit of service* from *immature egoism*
 - *shrewdness* and *healthy skepticism* from *cynicism*
 - *heroes* from "*celebrities*" and *entertainers*
 - *rule of law* from *personal despotism*

- *courage* from *cowardice*
 - *calculated risk-taking* from *recklessness*
 - *professionalism* from *careless sloppiness*
 - *reasoned opinions* from “*feelings*”
 - *proven fact* from *assumptions* and “*impressions*”
 - *healthy self-respect* from *vanity* and *pride*
 - *reasonable enjoyment* from *self-indulgent excess*
 - *love* from *eroticism*
 - *tact* from *offensive bluntness*
 - *courtesy* and *good manners* from *boorishness*
 - *integrity* from *disregard for truth* and *keeping one’s word*
 - *honorable competition* from *ruthless ambition*
 - *love for family and friends* from *selfish individualism*
 - *Christian moral life* from *materialism*
- In addition, adolescents generally respond well to the notion that all moral growth consists of growing from “self” to “others.” They understand from experience that children say, “What can you do for me?” but adults say, “What can I do for you?” They readily accept the notion that we don’t grow up when we can take care of ourselves. Rather, we really grow up only when we can take care of others, and want to. Maturity is another word for responsibility— the willingness and fortitude to undertake sacrifice for others’ welfare.
 - Teens also respond well to the following discussion about materialism:

The life-outlook of materialism does not mean, as many believe, merely the ambitious pursuit of things: fashionable clothes and cars, trendy expensive gadgets, a hefty portfolio. This sort of consumerist lust is only part of the problem. For after all, and as we’ve all experienced, many well-off people can possess all sorts of things without being materialistic.

Materialism really means *seeing and treating other people as things*. Materialism considers man (in the philosophical sense) as merely an object, a clever beast. This is where the evil lies.

The life-outlook of materialism has corollaries that directly affect the way people live and treat other human beings:

 - Life ends with death, so there’s no reward or punishment in any afterlife.
 - We answer to no Higher Power for the way we live; we answer only to the law, if they can catch us.
 - We can do anything we want to anyone, as long as it’s legal.
 - Conscience is just a bundle of sentiments.
 - Morality is merely social convention.

- “Rights” are nothing but disguised interests and rationalized power-grabbing.
- Since people are just objects, then whatever things we want—money, possessions, fame, power—can come ahead of people.
- Work is for ego and money, and money is for power and a pleasurable life.
- The only real evil is pain.
- Life has no purpose but the pursuit of pleasure and power.

This heartless and Godless outlook on life—the belief that man is a beast—is the exact antithesis of Christian morality, indeed of elementary decency among people of good will. Yet we find it promoted aggressively in many business and professional affairs, in elements of the media and in public life. Today we even find it seeping its way like acid into family life.

In a sense, this materialistic outlook comes from growing up without internalizing those significant invisible realities that lead to Christian life: God, the soul, grace, sin, honor, integrity, courage, conscience, and the rest. Young people who internalize nothing about the spiritual dimension of life will entrap themselves wholly in the material; as adults they will live as technically skilled barbarians. Their lives will center on themselves and their senses, their ego and their possessions. They’ll never progress from serving self to serving others.

- Another concept they grasp, related to the above, is that of sizing up people according to their values. We can explain it this way:

To assess someone’s values means to judge what his or her priorities are in life. That is, when considering the main things in life that people really prize and live for (as listed below), which of these come ahead of the others? When we weigh someone’s values, which of these things are consistently foremost in that person’s heart, which are subordinate, and which are scarcely even considered at all?

- friendship with God, commitment to living a moral life
- welfare of family and friends
- country
- money
- truth
- satisfying, service-oriented work
- career advancement
- comfort and convenience
- fame and glory
- addictive substances

- pleasure and amusement
- power over others
- safety and security
- conformity: acceptance by others, being fashionably “with it”
- vengeance

Adolescents can internalize this framework and apply it in many ways. In first place, obviously, is to help them set their own priorities in life. They can use it to assess persons in history, literature, and in public life, as well as people they know now and will meet later in their lives. It’s also a vital basis for one of the most important choices they will make in life: to marry someone who shares their own values—that is, whose priorities are identical with their own—and no one else.

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