

Adolescent Faith Development

After three days, they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them (Luke 2: 46-49).

Sandwiched between the infancy narratives and the accounts of Jesus' adult ministry is this snapshot of Jesus "when he was twelve years old" (Luke 2: 42). It is the only passage in the Gospels that touches on his adolescence, yet within these few short verses, we can clearly recognize the developmental evolution of those beginning the transition from childhood to teenager. We see Jesus questioning not only his parents, but also his tradition – that which has helped him make meaning of his relationships with God, self, his family and others thus far in his life. Here we meet a twelve-year-old Jesus evolving before our eyes. He has become an adolescent.

Historically, adolescence has been defined as the transitional time between childhood and adulthood encompassing the years between the onset of puberty and 18. But adolescence has become a shifting target in our culture.

Due to changes in diet and health care, on-set of puberty frequently begins as early as age 10 or 11 – and the over-sexualization present in the constant media barrage pushes our "tweens" to move into adolescence earlier and stay in this – developmental place longer.

As their bodies change, so too does their cognition. Psychologist Jean Piaget names this new stage of cognitive development [formal operations](#). This stage is defined by the ability to imagine all possible perspective and to self-reflect on the previous concepts learned in the previous stage. Concepts about objects can now be manipulated and the ability to test one factor by holding other factors constant develops. The ability to transcend empirical experience and image what might be. The brain can now construct ideal states or regulative norms, giving the adolescent the ability to be critical of self, others and the world.

The driving questions of adolescent can be best summarized by the question, "So who's in charge here anyway?" In terms of faith development, adolescents question the faith they have inherited and reflect upon it through the lens of their experience. Adolescents need to question, test, reject, and try on new ideas about faith in order to construct (or reject) what they have been taught and to make faith their own.

Because the adolescent self has not yet internalized its own beliefs and values, during this period of testing and challenge, teens rely on the ways others make

meaning and experience him/her. Thus, the role of the peer group takes front and center stage in the lives of teens.

While our society tends to enforce the role of the peer group, our culture seems to suggest that we should let our children go at this point. **THIS IS A HUGE MISTAKE!** While teens do developmentally need to test the values and beliefs of their parents and do distance themselves from their parents, parents remain the most important influences. It is important for parents to set clear boundaries while negotiating and explaining why the parent thinks as they do.

Within congregational life, it is time for adults who are NOT parents of the teens to take a major role in the faith formation of teens. Teens need a safe and respected space to share their doubts and uncertainties with adults whose own faith is centered in such a way that they can encourage, explore and wander with the adolescent questioners in the group. Adults who work with youth need to be both flexible and firm. Boundaries will need to be explored and agreed upon. Confidentiality as appropriate needs to be maintained (with the exception of information that is dangerous to the teen or to others).

It is also very important the topic of sexuality and sexual expression be explored within the faith community. Whatever the personal beliefs of the adults leading youth at this age, we cannot refuse to talk about it within the context of a life of faith. It is too big an item on the teen radar screen (and the media to which they are constantly exposed) to be ignored. Teaching that reflects both the sacredness of sex and the sacredness of the individuals involved is crucial. We have to be able to talk with teens about it and we have to understand that no matter our personal beliefs about sex, teens have sex. The writers of the inter-denominational curriculum [Journey to Adulthood](#) point out:

[Our adolescents] are literally deluged with images and ideas without context, without consequence. MTV and movies [along with You Tube and other internet media] have become the textbooks for adult life. Both have a place in our culture; storytelling and music have always played a role in culture, but not to the extent that they do today. It may sound like a joke, but it is not meant to be. By the time our young people hit the age of say, fifteen or sixteen, they have seen more, great, perfect, well-lit and well-choreographed sex than any of us are ever going to have. The problem is it is sex without relationship. Without context.

These same writers make the additional point that no matter what we believe about sex – when and with whom it should be had – Jesus came, did and rose again for all of us. No youth should die from sex and we have an obligation to make sure our teens know how to be safe.

Our scriptures support the questioning and exploration of this period. In addition to Jesus in the Temple, there is the wonderful story of Jesus' call to

life of Jairus' daughter in Luke 8: 46-56, which ends with the words, "She was 12 years old." Friendship stories have great appeal to teens – the story of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth: 1). David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18-20), the story of Mary, Martha and Lazarus' friendship with Jesus (John: 11-12), and teens will recognize themselves in the question Jesus poses to his peer group, "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29).

Adolescence is a rich time for faith development and the building of lasting relationships within the groups of youth and those who are privileged to lead them,