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Developmental Needs of Adolescents and Media

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Adolescent Time Spent with Media

During adolescence, children spend less time with parents and an increasingly large amount of time by themselves, during which they often participate in unsupervised media, such as television, music, and video games. The typical American adolescent listens to music approximately 4 hours a day and watches television approximately 2 hours a day. In addition, 75% of adolescents have access to computers, 61% report surfing the Internet, and 70% of adolescent girls read popular teen magazines. In combination, these media consume approximately 8 hours of adolescents’ time each day. Given the vast exposure to media influences, research suggests that media serve a number of developmental purposes for adolescents beyond that of mere entertainment.

Developmental Needs of Adolescents

A great deal of research has examined the developmental transitions that children experience as they enter adolescence. These changes can be loosely placed into three main categories: first, physical changes, such as the increased hormonal levels and sexual development characteristic of puberty; second, advances in cognitive development, characterized by increases in abstract thought; and third, social changes, such as changes in relationships with parents and peers. These three areas of adolescent development interact with one another to make adolescence an age of transition characterized by unique developmental needs, for some of which American adolescents may rely more heavily on media as a source of self-socialization. This entry focuses on adolescents’ identity development and need for increased autonomy, and on the ways that adolescents use media to facilitate these goals.

Adolescent Identity Formation

A primary challenge undertaken during adolescence and emerging adulthood is the formation of an identity distinct from one’s parents. This does not necessarily mean that the adolescent will choose an identity that conflicts with that desired by parents, but it does suggest that many adolescents will experience some period of exploration and experimentation as they search for a unique place in the world. In their search for identity, adolescents may intentionally or unintentionally turn to the media for an understanding of what is socially acceptable. A few of the most salient aspects of identity formation for which adolescents use media as a source of socialization are gender identity, sexual identity, and ethnic identity.

Gender Identity

The media send very clear messages of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman, and sometimes offer exaggerations of gender stereotypes that profoundly influence children’s understanding of gender and gender roles. Television sends messages about
gender in a number of ways. One message is conveyed by the sheer underrepresentation of woman on television; another by the portrayal of stereotypic occupations of women and men. Although this has changed slightly over the past 20 years, commercial television provides youth with many traditional views of what is masculine and what is feminine and may contribute greatly to the occupational aspirations of teenagers. Research suggests that when gender-stereotyped television is introduced to an area that previously did not have television, the youth in that area become more gender stereotyped. Although this may be true, adolescents may also seek non-gender-stereotyped information on television that leads to emulation of a role model who defies gender stereotypes, such as a female athlete or a male schoolteacher.

In addition to television, video games and magazines may be used by adolescents as a source of information on gender identity. Nearly 99% of video games are targeted toward males and feature violence, loud sound effects, and rapid movement. This includes educational software that emphasizes male themes and plays to the strengths of males. Teen magazines also send clear messages about gender and what it means to be masculine and feminine. Teen magazines set guidelines about body image, fashion, and beauty for young girls. Although girls are generally the target of teen magazines, boys are also increasingly susceptible to the messages about male body image and male orientation toward females that abound in magazines for men and boys. Both males and females seeking to understand how to behave can access multiple sources of media for clear, albeit often misleading, information on gender identity.

**Sexual Identity**

With the onset of physical changes during adolescence, youth look to media for information about their own sexual identity and sexual behaviors. This may be particularly true for adolescents who are less sexually experienced and who may not be receiving the answers they seek from other socialization sources, such as parents. Magazines provide ample information about what relationships should entail and how one should behave in a sexual relationship. Music with sexual themes and computer or video pornography are also media sources used by adolescents to gain knowledge about sexual roles. Girls commonly turn to romantic television or books to gain ideas of what love and sexuality should look and feel like, and these sources may provide youth with skewed views of sexuality and dating, setting unrealistic expectations.

Although media are a rich source of sexual information for adolescents, they may provide adolescents with sexual values that are contrary to parental values. For example, research has found that the majority of prime-time television contains content of a sexual nature; in most cases, sexual actions and language occur between unmarried couples with little reference to contraception or the potentially negative consequences of sexual activity, such as sexually transmitted diseases. Given that parents often do not provide adolescents with sexual information and that adolescents may feel uncomfortable discussing issues of a sexual nature with their parents, media are an important socialization agent for adolescents seeking information about their sexual identity.

**Ethnic Identity**

Another salient aspect of adolescent identity development is ethnic identity—adolescents’ expression of affinity and pride in their cultures of origin. Adolescents’ use of media as sources of information regarding ethnicity may be particularly significant for those who have limited real-life exposure to peers of different ethnicities. Much like gender identity, information provided by the media on ethnic minorities may be highly stereotypical or, conversely, may provide information that combats racial stereotypes. Messages on ethnic identity are prevalent in adolescent music as well as commercial television and movies. In general, television underrepresents the number of minorities in real life and sends messages that do not reflect the diversity in America. As a result, adolescents may construct ideas about the unimportance of certain ethnic groups, as well as images of how people of other ethnicities are likely to behave.

If adolescents are not exposed to ethnic diversity in their daily lives, media may provide them with the information they seek. The frequent portrayal of minorities as victims or in violent roles on television may encourage intolerance and fear on the part of European American teens, as well as providing, for minority youth, negative stereotypes of what they should aspire to become. Research has found that movies have a great influence on how adolescents perceive those of differing ethnicity. For example, movies that portrayed a minority group in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner were found to make strong impressions on children of all ages, in many cases altering perceptions of people of another race. Minority adolescents also rely heavily on television to provide them with messages, which may or may not be accurate, about European Americans and the values espoused by the majority culture.

**Autonomy**

The adolescent search for an identity distinct from that of parents is characterized by a desire for increased au-
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tonomy. Although this desire may be perceived as rebellion, adolescents often turn to media to express their individuality or autonomy. This is often reflected in adolescents’ use of private media, which usually takes place in the solitude of their bedrooms. Research suggests that music is a particularly important way in which youth choose to express their differences from their parents. So what may seem like “jungle music” to adults is merely a means by which adolescents exert some control over their growing need for autonomy. In addition, this time alone is used as a means of identifying with a peer culture and as a respite from the emotional roller coaster common during adolescence.

Peer Identification

As adolescents spend less time with parents, they spend more time with peers. Media are sometimes used by adolescents as a means of identifying with their peer group and expressing their autonomy as a peer culture distinct from that of adults. The existence of a distinct peer culture is easily recognized by adults who may seem unaware of popular television programs watched by teens, the latest video game craze, or the most recent music release. The use of media, particularly music, may help adolescents feel a connection to peers in general, regardless of actual association, or may define a particular peer group or crowd. Another way in which adolescents learn about youth culture is through advertisements encouraging them to buy the latest clothing, beauty product, or breakfast cereal. Adolescents are exposed to more than 20 commercials per hour on television and spend $67 billion a year on commercial products. Whether it is a famous athlete advertising breakfast cereal or the latest pop star promoting a particular clothing line, adolescents gain information about peer culture from media advertisements and use this information as a guide to what is popular among youth.

Coping

Research suggests that, as adolescents distance themselves from their parents, their sense of self and, in turn, their self-esteem decrease. Adolescents struggle with who they think they are and who they want to become, and this struggle is often characterized by increased emotionality. Much of this search for autonomy and a sense of self occurs while the adolescent is alone, which is often a time of loneliness and depression. As a result, many adolescents turn to media as a way of coping with the loneliness, frustration, and anger prominent during adolescence. Adolescents use solitary television viewing both to express their autonomy by watching what they choose and to detach themselves from the emotional rigors of the day. The major portion of solitary media time is spent listening to music—65% for early adolescents. Many adolescents report using music not only to unwind but also to explore fantasies, purge anger, express their individuality, and think about relationships as expressed in popular love songs. Research has focused specifically on adolescents’ (particularly adolescent males’) use of rock or heavy metal music to resonate with their own feelings of frustration and rage. In many cases, adolescents claim that rock music actually helps them to feel happier or improves their emotional state.

Further Readings