Chapter 9

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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Think of our contradictory stereotypes about the teenage mind. Teenagers are supposed to be idealistic, thoughtful, and introspective; concerned with larger issues; pondering life in deeper ways; but also impulsive, moody, and out of control. We expect them to be the ultimate radicals, rejecting everything adults say, and the consummate conformists, dominated by the crowd, driven by the latest craze, totally influenced by their peers. After I trace how adolescence became a defined life stage, the chapter you are about to read will make sense of these contradictory ideas.
Setting the Context

Youth are heated by nature as drunken men by wine.

Aristotle (n.d.)

I would that there were no age between ten and twenty-three . . . , for there’s nothing in between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting . . .


As the quotations above illustrate, throughout history, wise observers of human nature have described young people as being emotional, hotheaded, and out of control. When, in 1904, G. Stanley Hall first identified a new life stage characterized by “storm and stress,” which he called “adolescence,” he was only echoing these timeless ideas. Moreover, as the mission of the young is to look at society in fresh, new ways, it makes sense that most cultures would view each new generation in ambivalent terms—praising young people for their energy and passion; fearing them as a menace and threat.

However, until fairly recently, young people never had years to explore life or rebel against society because they took on adult responsibilities at an early age. As you may remember from Chapter 1, adolescence only became a distinct stage of life in the United States during the twentieth century, when—for most children—going to high school became routine (Mintz, 2004; Modell, 1989; Palladino, 1996).

Look into your family history and you may find a great-grandparent who finished high school or college. But a century ago, these events were fairly rare, as the typical U.S. child left school after sixth or seventh grade to find work (Mintz, 2004). Unfortunately, however, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, there was little work to actually find. Idle and at loose ends, young people took to roaming the countryside, angry, demoralized, and depressed. Alarmed by the situation, the federal government took action. At the same time that it instituted the Social Security system to provide for the elderly (to be discussed in Chapter 13), the Roosevelt administration implemented a national youth program to lure young people to school. The program worked. By 1939, 75 percent of all U.S. teenagers were attending high school.

High school boosted the intellectual skills of a whole cohort of Americans. But it produced a generation gap between these young people and their less educated, often immigrant parents and encouraged teens to spend their days together as an isolated, age-segregated group. Then, during the 1950s, when entrepreneurs began to target products to this new, lucrative “teen” market, we developed our familiar adolescent culture with its distinctive music and dress (Mintz, 2004; Modell, 1989). The sense of an adolescent society bonded together (against their elders) reached its height during the late 1960s and early 1970s. With “Never trust anyone over 30” as its slogan, the huge teenage baby boom cohort rejected the conventional rules related to marriage and gender roles and transformed the way we live our adult lives today.

In this chapter, we will explore the experience of being adolescent in the contemporary developed world—a time in history when we expect teenagers to go to high school (and now college) and society insulates young people from adult responsibilities for a decade or more. First, I’ll enter the teenage mind, making sense of why

“storm and stress” G. Stanley Hall’s phrase for the intense moodiness, emotional sensitivity, and risk-taking tendencies that characterize the life stage he labeled adolescence.
adolescents, like Samantha and Sam, seem both remarkably mature and immature. Then, I'll chart how teenagers separate from their parents and relate to one another in groups. This chapter ends by touching on some issues that affect the millions of young people living in impoverished regions of the world, who can't count on having a life stage called adolescence at all.

Before beginning your reading, you might want to take the “Stereotypes About Adolescence: True or False?” quiz in Table 9.1. In the following pages, I'll be discussing why each stereotype is right or wrong.

### The Mysterious Teenage Mind

Thoughtful and introspective, but impulsive, moody, and out of control; peer-centered conformists and rebellious risk takers: Can teenagers really be all these things? In our search to explain these contradictions, let's first look at three classic theories of teenage thinking; then explore fascinating studies related to teenage storm and stress.

### Three Classic Theories of Teenage Thinking

Have a thoughtful conversation with a 16-year-old and a 10-year-old and you will be struck by the remarkable mental growth that occurs during adolescence. It's not so much that teenagers know much more than they did in fourth or fifth grade, but that adolescents think in a different way. With an elementary school child in the concrete operational stage, you can have a rational talk about daily life. With a teenager, you can have a rational talk about ideas. This ability to reason abstractly about concepts is the defining quality of Jean Piaget's formal operational stage (see Table 9.2 on the next page).

### Formal Operational Thinking: Abstract Reasoning at Its Peak

Children in concrete operations can look beyond the way objects immediately appear. They realize that when Mommy puts on a mask, she's still Mommy “inside.” They understand that when you pour a glass of juice or milk into a different-shaped glass, the amount of liquid remains the same. Piaget believed that when children reach the formal operational stage, at around age 12, this ability to think abstractly takes a qualitative leap. Teenagers are able to reason logically in the realm of pure thought. Specifically, according to Piaget:
ADOLESCENTS CAN THINK LOGICALLY ABOUT CONCEPTS AND HYPOTHETICAL POSSIBILITIES. Ask fourth- or fifth-graders to put objects such as sticks in order from small to large, and they will have no problem performing this seriation task. But present a similar task verbally: “Bob is taller than Sam, and Sam is taller than Bill. Who is the tallest?” and the same children will be lost. The reason is that, during adolescence, we first become capable of logically manipulating concepts in our minds (Elkind, 1968; Flavell, 1963).

Moreover, if you give a child in concrete operations a reasoning task that begins, “Suppose snow is blue,” she will refuse to go further, saying, “That’s not true!” Adolescents in formal operations have no problem tackling that challenge because once our thinking is liberated from concrete objects, we are comfortable reasoning about concepts that may not be real.

ADOLESCENTS CAN THINK LIKE REAL SCIENTISTS. When our thinking occurs on an abstract plane, we can approach problems in a systematic way, devising a strategy to scientifically prove that something is true.

Piaget designed an exercise to reveal this new scientific thought: He presented children with a pendulum apparatus and unattached strings and weights (see Figure 9.1). Notice that the strings differ in their length and the weights vary in size or heaviness. Children’s task was to connect the weights to the strings, then attach them to the pendulum, to decide which influence determined how quickly the pendulum swung from side to side. Was it the length of the string, the heaviness of the weight, or the height from which the string was released?

Think about how to approach this problem, and you may realize that it’s crucial to be systematic—keeping everything constant but the factor whose influence you want to assess (remember my explanation of an experiment in Chapter 1). To test whether it’s the heaviness of the weight, you must keep the string length and the height from which you drop it constant, varying only the weight. Then, you need to isolate another variable, keeping everything else the same. And when you vary the length of the string, keeping everything else the same, you will realize that the string length alone affects how quickly the pendulum swings.
Elementary school children, Piaget discovered, approach these problems haphazardly. Only adolescents adopt a scientific strategy to solve reasoning tasks (Flavell, 1963; Ginsburg & Opper, 1969).

**HOW DOES THIS CHANGE IN THINKING APPLY TO REAL LIFE?** This new ability to think hypothetically and scientifically explains why it’s not until in high school that we can thrill to a poetic metaphor or comprehend chemistry experiments (Kroger, 2000). It’s only during high school that we can join the debate team and argue the case for and against capital punishment, no matter what we personally believe. In fact, reaching the formal operational stage explains why teenagers are famous for debating everything in their lives. A 10-year-old who wants to stay up till 2 a.m. to watch a new movie will just keep saying, “I don’t want to go to bed.” A teenager will lay out his case point by point: “Mom, I got enough sleep last night. Besides, I only need six hours. I can sleep after school tomorrow.”

But, do all adolescents really reach formal operations? The answer is definitely no. For one thing—rather than being universal—formal operational reasoning only occurs in scientifically oriented Western cultures. Worse yet, even in our society, most people don’t make it to Piaget’s final stage. In a classic study, one researcher discovered only a fraction of U.S. adults approached the pendulum problem scientifically. More disheartening, when asked to debate a controversial issue, such as capital punishment, most people did not even realize that they needed to use logic to construct their case (Kuhn, 1989).

Still, even if many of us never reason like real scientists or master debaters, we can vividly see the qualities involved in formal operational thinking if we look at how adolescents—especially older teenagers—reason about their own lives.

If you are a traditional emerging-adult student, think back to the complex organizational skills it took to get into college. You may have learned about your options from an adviser, researched each possibility on the Internet, visited campuses, and constructed different applications to showcase your talents. Then, when you got accepted, you needed to reflect on your future self again: “This school works financially, but is it too large? How will I feel about moving far from home?” Would you have been able to mentally weigh these possibilities, and project yourself into the future in this way, at age 10, 12, or even 14?

The bottom line is that reaching concrete operations allows us to be on the same wavelength as the adult world. Reaching formal operations allows us to act in the world like adults.

**Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Judgment: Developing Internalized Moral Values**

This new ability to reflect on ourselves as people allows us to reflect on our personal values. Therefore, drawing on Piaget’s theory, developmentalist Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984) argued that during adolescence we become capable of developing a moral code that guides our lives. To measure this moral code, Kohlberg constructed ethical dilemmas, had people reason about these scenarios, and asked raters to chart the responses according to the three levels of moral...
thought outlined in Table 9.3 above. Before looking at the table, take a minute to respond to the "Heinz dilemma," the most famous problem on Kohlberg’s moral judgment test:

A woman was near death from cancer. One drug might save her. The druggist was charging . . . ten times what the drug cost him to make. The . . . husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money but he could only get together about half of what it cost. [He] asked the . . . druggist to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said NO! Heinz broke into the man’s store to steal the drug. . . . Should he have done that? Why?

If you thought in terms of whether Heinz would be personally punished or rewarded for his actions, you would be classified at the lowest level of morality, the preconventional level. Responses such as “Heinz should not take the drug because he will go to jail,” or “Heinz should take the drug because then his wife will treat him well,” suggest that—you focus is solely on external consequences, whether Heinz will get in trouble or be praised—you are not demonstrating any moral sense.

If you made comments such as “Heinz should [or shouldn’t] steal the drug because it’s a person’s duty to obey the law [or to stick up for his wife]” or “Yes, human life is sacred, but the rules must be obeyed,” your response would be classified at the conventional level—right where adults typically are. This shows your morality revolves around the need to uphold society’s norms.

**TABLE 9.3: Kohlberg’s Three Levels of Moral Reasoning, with Sample Responses to the Heinz Dilemma**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reasons for acting in a certain way</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preconventional level</td>
<td>Person operates according to a “Will I be punished or rewarded?” mentality.</td>
<td>(1) to avoid getting into trouble or to get concrete benefits. (2) person discusses what will best serve his own needs (“Will it be good for me?”), although he may also recognize that others may have different needs.</td>
<td>(1) Heinz shouldn’t steal the drug because then the police will catch him and he will go to jail. (2) Heinz should steal the drug because his wife will love him more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional level</td>
<td>Person’s morality centers on the need to obey society’s rules.</td>
<td>(1) to be thought of as a “good person”; (2) the idea that it’s vital to follow the rules to prevent a breakdown in society.</td>
<td>(1) Heinz should steal the drug because that’s what “a good husband” does; or Heinz should not steal the drug because good citizens don’t steal. (2) Heinz can’t steal the drug—even though it might be best—because, if one person decides to steal, so will another and then another, and then the laws would all break down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postconventional level</td>
<td>Person has a personal moral code that transcends society’s rules.</td>
<td>(1) talks about abstract concepts, such as taking care of the welfare of all people; (2) discusses the fact that there are universally valid moral principles that transcend anything society says.</td>
<td>(1) Although it’s wrong for Heinz to steal the drug, there are times when rules must be disobeyed to provide for people’s welfare. (2) Heinz must steal the drug because the obligation to save a human life is more important than every other consideration.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Within each general moral level, the reasons and examples numbered (1) reflect a slightly lower sub stage of moral reasoning than those numbered (2).*

*Source: Adapted from Reimer, Paolitto, & Hersh, 1983.*
People who reason about this dilemma using their own moral guidelines apart from the society’s rules are operating at Kohlberg’s highest postconventional level. As the table shows, a response showing postconventional reasoning might be, “No matter what society says, Heinz had to steal the drug because nothing outweighs the universal principle of saving a life.”

When he conducted studies with different age groups, Kohlberg discovered that at age 13, preconventional answers were universal. By 15 or 16, most children around the world were reasoning at the conventional level. Still, many of us stop right there. Although some of Kohlberg’s adults did think postconventionally, using his incredibly demanding criteria, almost no person consistently made it to the highest moral stage (Reimer, Paolitto, & Hersh, 1983; Snarey, 1985).

**HOW DOES KOHLBERG’S THEORY APPLY TO REAL LIFE?** Kohlberg’s categories get us to think deeply about our values. Do you have a moral code that guides your actions? Would you intervene, no matter what the costs, to save a person’s life? These categories give us insights into other people’s moral priorities, too. While reading about Kohlberg’s preconventional level, you might have thought: “I know someone just like this. This person has no ethics. He only cares about whether or not he gets caught!”

However, Kohlberg’s research has been severely criticized. For one thing, Kohlberg was wrong when he said that children can’t go beyond a punishment and reward mentality. As with other social cognitive skills described earlier in this book, developmentalists have discovered that our intrinsic sense of fairness kicks in at a surprisingly young age. Three-year-olds get distressed when an experimenter distributes prizes, such as stickers, unequally. They may even object when they are getting most of the rewards (LoBue and others, 2011). Four-year-olds will say “If you get an unfair prize, give it to the person who deserves it.” They also realize that “stealing is wrong” (Nunner-Winkler, 2007).

In a classic late-twentieth-century critique, feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan has argued that Kohlberg’s stages offer a specifically male-centered approach to moral thought. Recall that being classified at the postconventional stage requires abstractly weighing ideals of justice. People must verbalize the tension between societies’ rules and universal ideals. Women’s morality, Gilligan believes, revolves around concrete, caring-oriented criteria: “Hurting others is wrong”; “Moral people take responsibility to reach out in a nurturing way” (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988).

Gilligan’s criticisms bring up an interesting question: Is Kohlberg’s scale valid? Does the way people reason about his scenarios relate to the attitudes and behaviors, which, as you learned in Chapter 6, predict acting prosocially in life? Unfortunately, the answer is “not necessarily.” When outstandingly prosocial teenagers—community leaders who set up programs for the homeless—took Kohlberg’s test, researchers rated their answers at the same conventional level as non-prosocial teens! (See Reimer, 2003.)

Concerns about whether responses to artificial vignettes predict real-world morality are heightened when we look around. We all know people who can spout the highest ethical principles, but behave pretty despicably: the minister who lectures his congregation about the sanctity of marriage while cheating on his wife; the chairman of the ethics committee in the state legislature who has been taking bribes for years.

Still, when he describes the changes in moral reasoning that take place during adolescence, Kohlberg has an important point. Teenagers are famous for questioning society’s rules, for seeing the injustice of the world, and for getting involved in idealistic causes (as you can read about in the Experiencing the Lifespan box on the next page). Unfortunately, this ability to step back and see the world as it should be, but rarely is, may produce the emotional storm and stress of teenage life.
Olivia, a Tenth-Grade Social Activist

In my niece Olivia’s room there are no photos of teen idols, no cosmetics, no closet overflowing with clothes. The peace symbols and posters with titles such as “U.S. out of my uterus” show that this 16-year-old has a clear moral vision. Here’s how Olivia explains the passions that dominate her life:

I volunteer at a soup kitchen. I am active in the Young People’s Socialist League—that’s a grassroots organization centering on social justice. I went to a couple of their protests at employers’ workplaces. They pay illegal immigrants, like, $2 an hour and take advantage of the fact that they can’t complain to the police.

My friends are wonderful, but a lot of the other kids at school are superficial. In our town, you have a lot of racial and class divisions. Everyone talks about what a diverse community it is, but the White kids live on the north end and the poor minority kids live on the south end. At school, there’s a lot of separatism in the races. You might be friendly on the surface, but there’s no real mixing. There’s also this mad scramble to get into college. Parents are putting a lot of pressure on the kids. If they don’t get a 95, there is going to be hell to pay. Some kids in the AP chemistry class were cheating . . . White kids from the north end. And they had already been inducted into the National Honor Society. So when these kids were caught, the department pretended like the thing never happened. If you are White and it looks like your parents have money, or if you are the kind of kid who looks like they are going to an Ivy League school, they are not interested in whether you cheat or not. It’s a very Machiavellian system.

I try to do the best job I can, but I’m not interested in the “get the grade, get the grade” mentality. My plan is to apply to the United World College for my senior year. That’s this real cool, rigorous academic program. They take high school students to places where you can make a difference, like in India and Africa. In Westchester we are the third richest county in the nation, so you don’t get a chance to see real poverty. I’m trying to learn more about the inequality gap between nations. It’s really of mammoth proportions. I want to spend these years taking time to read as much as I can.

Elkind’s Adolescent Egocentrism: Explaining Teenage Storms

This was David Elkind’s (1978) conclusion when he drew on Piaget’s concept of formal operations to make sense of teenagers’ emotional states. Elkind argues that, when children make the transition to formal operational thought at about age 12, they can see beneath the surface of adult rules. A sixth-grader realizes that his 10 o’clock bedtime, rather than being carved in stone, is an arbitrary number capable of being contested and changed. A socially conscious 14-year-old, like Olivia in the Experiencing the Lifespan Box above, becomes acutely aware of the difference between what adults say they do and how they really act. The same people who tell you to treat everyone equally let the rich kids cheat. The same parents and teachers who punish you for missing your curfew or being late to class can’t get to the dinner table or a meeting on time.

The realization that the emperor has no clothes (“Those godlike adults are no better than me”), according to Elkind, leads to anger, anxiety, and the impulse to rebel. From arguing with a ninth-grade English teacher over a grade to testing the limits by drinking or driving fast, teenagers are well known for protesting anything just because it’s “a rule.”

More tantalizing, Elkind draws on formal operational thinking to make sense of the classic behavior we often observe in young teens—their incredible sensitivity to what other people think. According to Elkind, when children first become attuned to other people’s flaws, this feeling turns inward to become an obsession with what others think about their own personal flaws. This leads to adolescent egocentrism—the distorted feeling that one’s own actions are at the center of everyone else’s consciousness.
So 13-year-old Melody drives her parents crazy. She objects to everything from the way they dress to how they chew their food. When her mother picks her up from school, she will not let this humiliating person emerge from the car: “Mom, I don’t know you!” She does not spare herself: A minuscule pimple is a monumental misery; stumbling and spilling her food on the school lunch line is a source of shame for months (“Everyone is laughing at me! My life is over!”). According to Elkind, this intense self-consciousness is caused by one facet of adolescent egocentrism called the *imaginary audience*. By that term, he meant that young teens, such as Melody, literally feel that they are on stage, with everyone watching everything they do.

A second component of adolescent egocentrism is the *personal fable*. Teenagers feel that they are invincible and that their own life experiences are unique. So Melody believes that no one has ever had so disgusting a blemish. She has the *most* embarrassing mother in the world.

These mental distortions explain the exaggerated emotional storms we laugh about during the early adolescent years. Unfortunately, the “It can’t happen to me” component of the personal fable may lead to tragic acts. Boys put their lives at risk by drag racing on the freeway because they imagine that they can never die. A girl does not use contraception when she has sex because, she reasons, “Yes, other girls can get pregnant, but not me. Plus, if I do get pregnant, I will be the center of attention, a real heroine.”

### Studying Three Aspects of Storm and Stress

Are teenagers unusually sensitive to people’s reactions? Is Elkind (like other observers, from Aristotle to Shakespeare to G. Stanley Hall) correct in saying that risk taking is intrinsic to being a “hotheaded youth”? Are adolescents really intensely emotional and/or likely to be emotionally disturbed? Now, let’s turn to research related to these three core aspects of teenage storm and stress.

#### Are Adolescents Exceptionally Socially Sensitive?

In the last chapter, you learned that, when they reach puberty, children—especially girls—become self-critical (Oldehinkel, Verhulst, & Ormel, 2011) and attuned to their bodies’ flaws. In Chapter 6, you saw how the passion to fit in socially (and target people who don’t!) causes bullying to flare up during the early teens.

In one revealing study, when researchers asked middle schoolers to list their priorities, these pre-teens ranked socially succeeding as their top concern. Being in the “in crowd” was more important than being a scholar, being nice, or even having friends (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2011)! When scientists directly explored age differences in social sensitivity—by constructing a cyberball game and then arranging for people to get ostracized (no one threw them the ball)—as they predicted, adolescents reacted to this social slight more intensely than did adults (Sebastian and others, 2010).

This heightened social sensitivity makes sense of Laurence Steinberg’s study described in the How Do We Know box on the next page. In emotionally charged situations, teens are apt to make risky decisions when with their friends—which explains why even the most levelheaded adolescents may get into trouble when the group atmosphere is right (Steinberg, 2005; 2008).
During early and middle adolescence, this risk-taking propensity is heightened by a tendency to prioritize immediate gratifications over future rewards. Steinberg’s research team used a computer game in which people from age 10 through their twenties could choose to get a smaller amount of money right now or wait some time for a larger reward. Teens under age 16 accepted a smaller payoff to get a reward sooner than older players did (Steinberg and others, 2009). Or, as my student puzzled when he confessed to the class about a high-speed chase with the police that landed him in juvenile detention at age 15: “It’s like I couldn’t see that I might eventually end up in jail. All I thought of was the thrill of possibly getting away.”

**Are Adolescents Risk Takers?**

Doing something and getting away with it... You are driving at 80 miles an hour and stop at a stop sign and a cop will turn around the corner and you start giggling. Or you are out drinking or maybe you smoked a joint, and you say “hi” to a police officer and he walks by...  

*(quoted in Lightfoot, 1997, p. 100)*

This quotation from a teen in an interview study, plus Steinberg’s laboratory findings, show that (no surprise) the second storm-and-stress stereotype is **definitely** true. From
the thrill of taking that first drink to the lure of driving very fast, pushing the envelope is a basic feature of teenage life (Dahl, 2004; Steinberg, 2010).

Consider, for instance the findings of yearly nationwide University of Michigan-sponsored polls tracking U.S. young people’s lives. In examining data spanning 1997 to 2008, researchers found that one in six teens had been arrested by age 18. By age 23, the arrest rate slid up to an astonishing almost 1 in 3! (See Brame and others, 2012.) In the 2010 survey, roughly, 2 in 10 high school seniors admitted to binge drinking (defined as having five or more drinks at a time for males and four or more drinks in a row for females) (Johnston and others, 2011). (Table 9.4 showcases some interesting research facts related specifically to alcohol and adolescents.)

The good news is that, as you can see in Figure 9.2, in contrast to our images of rampant teenage substance abuse, most high school seniors do not report using any illicit drugs (including alcohol) over the past year. Notice also that drug use was actually somewhat more common during the late 1970s and early 1980s—among the parents of today’s teens, during their own adolescence.

### TABLE 9.4: Three Stereotypes and Surprising Facts About Alcohol and Teens

| Stereotype #1: Teenagers who drink heavily are prone to abuse alcohol later in life. |
| Research answer: “It depends.” Beginning to drink at an atypically early age (under 16) is a risk factor for persistent problems (Pitkanen, Lyra, & Pulkkinen, 2005). However, during the late teens and twenties, drinking—at least in Western societies—is normative. So we can’t predict well from a person’s consumption at these peak-use ages to the rest of adulthood. |

| Stereotype #2: Involvement in athletics protects a teen from abusing alcohol. |
| Research answer: “False.” Actually, participation in high school sports is positively correlated with drinking (Barnes and others 2007; Peck, Vida, & Eccles, 2008)—especially for boys. In one study, identifying oneself as a jock predicted generally getting involved in delinquent acts! (Miller and others, 2007.) The best conclusion, however, is that sports neither promote nor discourage heavy drinking. We need to look at other core factors such as “aggressiveness” that may cause some teens to gravitate to athletics and also to abusing alcohol (Peck, Vida, & Eccles, 2008). |

| Stereotype #3: Middle childhood problems are risk factors for later excessive drinking. |
| Research answer: “Both true and surprisingly false.” As you might expect, childhood externalizing problems are one predictor of adult problem drinking (Englund and others, 2008; Pitkanen and others, 2008). However, two longitudinal investigations—conducted in the United States and Great Britain—revealed that, for girls, high academic achievement was a risk factor for heavy drinking in the early twenties! (Englund and others, 2008; Maggs, Patrick, & Feinstein, 2008.) To explain away this uncomfortable finding, researchers suggest that girls who do well academically may be more likely to go to college, where, as many of you are well aware, the whole environment strongly encourages drinking to excess.

Source: Johnston and others, 2011.

**FIGURE 9.2: Trends in prevalence of illicit drug use, reported by U.S. high school seniors from the mid-1970s to 2010:** Contrary to our stereotypes, only 2 in 5 U.S. high school seniors reports using any illicit drugs (including alcohol) over the past year. Notice also that drug use was actually somewhat more common during the late 1970s and early 1980s—among the parents of today’s teens, during their own adolescence.
Younger children also rebel, disobey, and test the limits. But, if you have seen a group of teenage boys hanging from the top of a speeding car, you know that the risks adolescents take can be threatening to life. At the very age when they are most physically robust, teenagers—especially males—are most likely to die of preventable causes such as accidents (Dahl, 2004; Spear, 2008). So, yes, parents can worry about their children—particularly their sons—when they haven’t made it home from a party and it’s already 2 a.m.!

**Are Adolescents More Emotional, More Emotionally Disturbed, or Both?**

Given this information, it should come as no surprise that the third major storm-and-stress stereotype is also correct: Adolescents are more emotionally intense than adults. Developmentalists could not arrive at this conclusion by using surveys in which they

![Figure 9.3: Three days in the life of Gregory Stone: An experience-sampling record](image)

This chart is based on three days of self-reports by a teenager named Greg Stone, as he was randomly beeped and asked to rate his moods and what he was doing at that moment. By looking at the ups and downs of Greg’s mood, can you identify the kinds of activities that he really enjoys or dislikes? Now, as an exercise, you might want to monitor your own moods for a few days and see how they change in response to your own life experiences. What insights does your internal mental checklist reveal about which activities are most enjoyable for you?

Source: Adapted from Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984, p. 111.
asked young people to reflect on how they generally felt. They needed a method to chart the minute-to-minute ups and downs of teenagers’ emotional lives.

Imagine that you could get inside the head of a 16-year-old as that person went about daily life. About 30 years ago, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson (1984) accomplished this feat through developing a procedure called the experience-sampling technique. The researchers asked students at a suburban Chicago high school to carry pagers programmed to emit a signal at random intervals during each day for a week. When the beeper went off, each teenager filled out a chart like the one you can see illustrated in Figure 9.3. Notice, if you scan Greg’s record, that the experience-sampling procedure gives us insights into what experiences make teenagers (and people of other ages) feel joyous or distressed. Let’s now look at what the charts revealed about the intensity of adolescents’ moods.

The records showed that adolescents do live life on an intense emotional plane. Teenagers—both boys and girls—reported experiencing euphoria and deep depression far more often than a comparison sample of adults. Teenagers also had more roller-coaster shifts in their moods. While a 16-year-old was more likely to be back to normal 45 minutes after feeling terrific, an adult was likely to still feel happier than average hours after reporting an emotional high.

Does this mean that adolescents’ moods are irrational? The researchers concluded that the answer was no. As Greg’s experience-sampling chart shows, teenagers don’t get excited or down in the dumps for no reason. It’s hanging out with their friends that makes them feel elated. It’s a boring class that bores them very, very much.

Does this mean that most adolescents are emotionally disturbed? Now, the answer is definitely no. Although the distinction can escape parents when their child wails, “I got a D on my chemistry test; I’ll kill myself!” there is a difference between being highly emotional and being emotionally disturbed.

Actually, when developmentalists ask teenagers to step back and evaluate their lives, they get an upbeat picture of how young people generally feel. Most adolescents around the world are confident and hopeful about the future (Gilman and others, 2008; Lewin-Bizan and others, 2010). In one U.S. poll, researchers classified 4 out of 10 adolescents as “flourishing”—efficacious, zestful, connected to family and friends. Only 6 percent were “languishing,” totally demoralized about life (Keys, 2007).

So the stereotypic impression that most teenagers are unhappy or suffer from serious psychological problems is false. Still, as you just read, the picture is far from totally rosy. Their risk-taking propensities make the late teens the peak crime years (Warr, 2007; see Figure 9.4). “Teenagers’ emotional storms can produce other distressing symptoms, too. Again, contrary to our stereotypes, adolescent suicide is rare (Males, 2009). For reasons to be explained in Chapter 13, the peak life stage for suicide is old

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**FIGURE 9.4: Frequency of arrests by age in a California study of offenders (n = 2350):**

This chart shows the standard age pattern around the world. The peak years for law breaking are the late teens, after which criminal activity falls off.

Source: Natsuaki, Ge, & Wenk, 2008.
nonsuicidal self-injury Cutting, burning, or purposely injuring one's body to cope with stress.

Most teens are upbeat and happy, and suicide is very, very rare during the adolescent years. But specific signs of distress, such as this boy's nonsuicidal self-injury (cutting behavior), seem surprisingly prevalent among affluent adolescents, especially girls.

A Potential Pubertal Problem, Popularity

Young teens' drive for social status, for instance, seems partly to blame for the fact that academic motivation often takes a nosedive in middle school (La Fontana & Cillessen, 2010; Li & Lerner, 2011). Worse yet—because at this age it can be "cool" to rebel (recall Chapter 6)—for children who are already somewhat instrumentally aggressive, being in the "popular group" is a risk factor for failing in school (Troop-Gordon, Visconti, & Kurtz, 2011). Therefore, chasing popularity can have academic costs. Plus, young teens may be faced with a difficult choice: "Either be in the 'in crowd' or do well in school" (Wilson, Karimpour, & Rodkin, 2011).

Making it into the in crowd can also have social costs. When pre-teens go all out for status (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010), they are less respected by their peers (Dijkstra and others 2010; Neal, 2010; Witvliet and others, 2010). Furthermore, longitudinal studies suggest that, when a child enters a high-status, rebellious middle school crowd, this achievement leads to more aggression over time (Sijtsema and others, 2010).

Finally, because social standing is so important at this age (Molloy, Gest, & Rulison, 2011), getting isolated from the in crowd can lead to becoming depressed (Buck &
Dix, 2012; Witvliet and others, 2010). Popularity pressures may be implicated in both the upsurge in unhappiness and acting out during the early teens!

Different Teenage Pathways

So far, I seem to be sliding into stereotyping “adolescents” as a monolithic group. This is absolutely not true! Teenagers, as we all know, differ greatly—in their passion to be popular, in their school connectedness, in their tendencies to take risks or get depressed. As diversity at this life stage—and any other age—is the norm, the critical question is, “Who gets derailed and who thrives during this landmark decade of life?”

Which Teens Get into Serious Trouble?

Without denying that serious adolescent difficulties can unpredictably erupt, here are three thunderclouds that foreshadow stormy weather ahead:

**AT-RISK TEENS TEND TO HAVE PRIOR EMOTION REGULATION DIFFICULTIES.** It should come as no surprise that one thundercloud relates to elementary school externalizing tendencies and academic difficulties. Not only is the lure of getting into trouble overwhelming, when a child’s problems regulating his behavior are already causing him to fail (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Li & Lerner, 2011; Sibley and others 2011), as I will describe later, children who are not succeeding with the mainstream kids gravitate toward antisocial groups of friends, who then give each other reinforcement for doing dangerous things.

Therefore, tests of executive functions—measures charting whether girls and boys are having difficulties generally thinking through their behavior—strongly predict adolescent storms (Pharo and others, 2011). Moreover, the same self-regulation issues that lead to teenage turmoil are apt to appear earlier in life.

**AT-RISK TEENS TEND TO HAVE POOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS.** Feeling alienated from one’s parents can also be a warning sign of developing storms. When researchers explored the emotions of teens who self-injured, these children often anguished: “My parents are way too critical”; “I can’t depend on my mom or dad” (Bureau and others, 2010; Yates, Allison, & Luthar, 2008).

In essence, these young people were describing an insecure attachment. Teenagers want to be listened to and respected. They need to know they are unconditionally loved (Allen and others, 2007). So, to use the attachment metaphor spelled out in Chapter 4, with adolescents, parents must be skillful dancers. They should understand when to back off and when to stay close. In the terminology of Chapter 7, adolescents require an authoritative discipline style.

Still, when we see correlations between teenagers’ reporting distant family relationships and their getting into trouble, is it simply parents who are at fault? Imagine that you are a teen who is having casual, unprotected sex or taking drugs. Wouldn’t you lie to your parents about your activities? And when you lied, wouldn’t you feel even more alienated: “My family knows nothing about my life”? (See Warr, 2007.)

Yes, it’s easy to say that being authoritative is vital in parenting teens. But take it from me (I’ve been there!), when your teenager is on the road to trouble, confronting him about his activities—or snooping into his Facebook page, and then saying “you’ve been lying to me”—is apt to backfire. So, it can be difficult for frantic parents to understand how to really act authoritatively in a much-loved son or daughter’s life.

Do children, who are already in trouble, cause parents to abandon acting authoritative and resort to harsh, power-assertive discipline or to emotionally withdraw? Given that human relationships are bidirectional, the answer is yes (Gault-Sherman, 2012; Willoughby & Hamza, 2011). More interesting, some adolescent specialists are
now questioning the standard advice that providing firm rules and careful monitoring prevents adolescents from going down the wrong path (Byrnes and others, 2011; Childs, Sullivan, & Culledge, 2011; Gault-Sherman, 2012; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010). Keeping total tabs on teenagers is impossible—as every parent knows. The best strategy is to adopt a positive approach: Encourage activities that foster young people’s passions (more about this later) and provide ample chances for shared “family fun” (Willoughby & Hamza, 2011).

AT-RISK TEENS LIVE IN A NON-NURTURING ENVIRONMENT. This brings me to the role the overall environmental atmosphere plays in teenage storms. If a school has stratified peer hierarchies that promote bullying (Wilson, Karimpour, & Rodkin, 2011), or a young person lives in a dangerous neighborhood (no surprise), the risk of problems accelerates. To rephrase the old saying: “It may take a village to raise a child, but it really takes a nurturing village to help an adolescent thrive.” Now, let’s look at who thrives during their teens.

Which Teens Flourish?

In high school I really got it together. I connected with my lifelong love of music. I’ll never forget that feeling when I got that special history prize my senior year.

At about age 15, I decided the best way to keep myself off the streets was to get involved in my church youth group. It was my best time of life.

As the quotations show, these attributes offer a mirror image of the qualities I just described: Teenagers thrive when they have superior executive functions and can thoughtfully direct their lives (Gestsdottir and others, 2010; Urban, Lewin-Bizan, & Lerner, 2010). They flourish when they are succeeding academically (Lewis and others, 2011) and are connected to school. Having a mentor or VIP (Very Important non-Parenatal adult) boosts young people’s self-esteem (Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2011)—and so does having a life interest, like music, provided your passion is nurtured by caring adults (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011).

Thriving does not mean staying out of trouble. In one study, teens who were flourishing sometimes confessed to a good amount of risk taking during the early and middle adolescent years (Lerner and others, 2010). So again, we need to understand that testing of the limits is part of the normal adolescent experience even among the happiest, healthiest teens (more about the implications of this message later).

And let’s not give up on children who do get seriously derailed. Developmentalists make a distinction between adolescence-limited turmoil (antisocial behavior during the teenage years) and life-course difficulties (antisocial behaviors that continue into adult life) (Moffitt, 1993). Perhaps you have a friend who used to stay out all night partying, drinking, or taking drugs, but later became a responsible parent. Or you may know an extremely “troubled teen” who is succeeding incredibly well after finding the right person–environment fit at college or work. (For a compelling example, stay tuned for my interview on the next page) If so, you understand a main message of the next chapter: We change the most during our emerging-adult years. (Table 9.5 offers a checklist so you can evaluate whether a child you love might have a stormy or sunny adolescence.)
Wrapping Things Up: The Blossoming Teenage Brain

Now, let’s put it all together: the mental growth; the morality; the emotionality; and sensitivity to what others think. Give teenagers an intellectual problem and they reason in mature ways. But younger teens tend to be captivated by popularity, and get overwhelmed in arousing situations when with their friends.

According to adolescence specialists, these qualities make sense when we look at the developing brain. During the teens, a dramatic pruning occurs in the frontal lobes (see Table 9.6). The insulating myelin sheath has years to go before reaching its

Table 9.5: Predicting Whether a Child Is at Risk for Teenage Storms or to Flourish: A Section Summary Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threatening Thunderclouds</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Does this child have emotion regulation difficulties and academic problems?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Does this child have distant family relationships?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Does this child live in a “toxic” community or attend a school with stratified peer hierarchies?</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sunny Signs</th>
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<tr>
<td>4. Does this child have good executive functions and/or is she connected to academics?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Does this child have a mentor or close family relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Does this child have a passion or talent that is being nurtured by caring adults?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Masten (2004), p. 315, and the sources in this section.

Table 9.6: Teenage Brain-Imaging Questions and Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #1: How does the brain change during adolescence?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Answer:</strong> Dramatically, in different ways: Frontal lobe grey matter (the neurons and synapses) peaks during the pre-teen years, and then declines due to pruning—meaning the cortex “gets thinner” over the teenage years. In the meantime, White matter (the myelin sheath) steadily grows into the twenties.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Question #2: Are there gender differences in this brain development?</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Answer:</strong> Yes. Girls are on a slightly earlier timetable with regard to this grey-matter peak (it’s age 10 for girls and 12 for boys)—meaning females are “advanced” in brain maturation. The genders also show different brain changes during puberty. For instance, in males, the volume of the amygdala (our “emotion center”) increases; females show a rise in hippocampal volume (a brain region involved in memory). Might these differences relate to different peak ages for intense “storm and stress” in girls and boys? Might they have anything to do with teen gender differences in depression, or the tendency to take dangerous risks? We do not know.</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Question #3: Do the brain-imaging findings mirror the behavioral research in this section?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Answer:</strong> Not really. For instance, although as suggested above, the teen brain matures in definite ways from adolescence to adulthood, studies exploring specific activation pattern differences between teens and adults—as they relate to social sensitivities, risky decisions, and so on—have inconsistent, sometimes confusing, results.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion:** While we do have good general data on teenage brain development, we still have far to go in neuroscientifically mapping the teenage (and adult!) mind.

Sources: Blakemore, Burnett, & Dahl, 2010; Bramen and others, 2011; Burnett and others, 2011; Lenroot & Giedd, 2010; Luciana, 2010; Negriff and others, 2011; Bava and others, 2010.

Note: The final statement here is based on my own impressions from reviewing the research cited above.
mature form. At the same time, puberty heightens the output of certain neurotransmitters, which provokes the passion to take risks (Guerri & Pascual, 2010; Steinberg, 2010) As Laurence Steinberg (2008) explains, it’s like starting the engine of adulthood with an unskilled driver. This heightened activation of the “socioemotional brain,” with a cognitive control center still “under construction,” makes adolescence a potentially dangerous time.

But from an evolutionary standpoint, it is logical to start with an emotional engine in high gear. Teenagers’ risk-taking tendencies propel them to venture into the world. Their passion to make it with their peers is vital to leaving their parents and forming new, close attachments as adults. The unique qualities of the adolescent mind are beautifully tailored to help young people make the leap from childhood to the adult world (Dahl, 2004; Steinberg, 2008).

**INTERVENTIONS: Making the World Fit the Teenage Mind**

Table 9.7 summarizes these section messages in a chart for parents. Now, let’s explore our discussion’s ramifications for society.

**Don’t punish adolescents as if they were mentally just like adults.** If the adolescent brain is a work in progress, it doesn’t make sense to have the same legal sanctions for teenagers who commit crimes that we have for adults. Rather than locking adolescents up, it seems logical that at this young age we focus on rehabilitation. As Laurence Steinberg (2008) and virtually every other adolescence expert suggest, with regard to the legal system, “less guilty by reason of adolescence” is the way to go.

Is the U.S. legal system listening to the adolescence specialists? The answer is absolutely no! As the Experiencing the Lifespan Box suggests, today officers and prosecutors have total leeway to transfer adolescents accused of violent crimes out of the Juvenile Justice system and have them tried as adults. Moreover, even though in 2005 the Supreme Court outlawed the death penalty for teens, the United States and Somalia share the dubious distinction of being the only two nations in the world where adolescents accused of murder can be jailed for life without parole. Yes, as my amazing interview with Jason suggests, with luck and a resilient temperament, a shockingly punitive approach can help turn a teen around. However, statistically speaking, there is no evidence that condemning adolescents to the gulag of dysfunctional adult prisons deters later criminal acts (Fabian, 2011). Do you believe that it’s ever acceptable to try teenagers as adults?

**Table 9.7: Tips for Parents of Teens**

1. Understand that strong emotions may not have the same meaning for your teen that they do for you. So try not to take random comments like “I hate myself” or “I’m the dumbest person in the world” very seriously. Also, let negative comments such as “I hate you” roll off your back. Just because your child gets furious at you, don’t think she doesn’t love you!

2. Provide family-centered activities—but ensure they are ones your teen will enjoy.

3. Understand that laying down rules is less effective than encouraging your child’s passions.

4. While sampling some forbidden activities is normal, if your teen is getting involved in clearly illegal activities or seems seriously depressed, you do need to be concerned.

5. Understand that your child’s peer choices (and peer-group status) offer good hints about her behavior, and that striving to be in the “popular crowd”—while normal—can have unpleasant consequences.

6. Keep the lines of communication open and enjoy your teenager!
If you think our legal system protects 16-year-olds from adult jail and that U.S. citizens can’t be falsely incarcerated without a trial, think again. Then, after reading Jason’s story, you might link his horrific teenage years to the qualities involved in resilience I discussed in Chapter 7.

I grew up with crazy stuff. My mom was a drug dealer and my dad passed away so I was adopted by my grandparents. I was kicked out of four schools before ninth grade. By age 15, I was involved with a street gang and heavy gun trading in Birmingham, Alabama. I was in a car with some older guys during a drive-by shooting, got pulled over, and that was the last time I saw daylight for over 3 years.

The original charge was carrying a concealed weapon, and I was sent to a juvenile boot camp. Then, two days after being discharged to house arrest, detectives were knocking on my door with the full charges: three counts of attempted murder. Turns out, two guys in the car had committed suicide and another had left the state so I was the only one left and the arresting officers decided to transfer me to county jail, where I ended up for 19 months.

If you go to trial and lose, you get the maximum sentence, 20 years to life, so—even though I was innocent—avoiding trial is the thing you want to do. What happens is that your lawyers keep negotiating plea bargains. First, I was offered 20 to life, with the idea I’d be out in 10 years; then 15 years, then 10. Not very appealing for a 16-year-old kid! Finally, by incredible good luck, I got a lawyer who takes kids from prisons and puts them into rehab facilities, and he convinced the judge that was best for me. I quickly had to take what they offered—being sent to the Nashville Rescue Mission and then a halfway house for 2 years—because my trial date was coming up very soon.

Jail was unbelievable. The ninth floor of the Jefferson County Jail is well known because that’s where they send criminals from the penitentiary who have committed the most violent crimes to await trial. My first cellmate had cut a guy’s head off. Inmates test you by challenging you to fight. Every time you get to know a group, the next week another group arrives and you have to fight again. The guards were no better. If they didn’t like a prisoner, they would persuade inmates to beat the living daylights out of that person.

What helped me cope were my dreams, because you are not in jail in your dreams. I wrote constantly, read all the time. Reading helped the most. What ultimately helped was being sent out of state (so I couldn’t get involved with my old friends) and, especially, my counselors at the mission. I never met guys so humble; such amazing people. Also, if I got into trouble again, I knew where I could be heading. Scared the heck out of me.

Now, everything I do is dependent on being normal. I’m 22. I have good friends but I haven’t told anyone anything about my past. I have a 3.5 average. I’m working two jobs. I’ll be the first person in my family to graduate college. I want to go to grad school to get my psychology Ph.D.

Don’t taint young people with a criminal record for minor teenage experimentation. Are you as disturbed as I am by the poll showing that, by their early twenties, almost one in three U.S. young people has been in trouble with the law? These statistics are especially galling because youth arrest rates (often for minor drug offenses) exploded during the very years when the United States experienced a dramatic decline in violent crimes (see Pinker, 2011). Given that risk taking is normal during adolescence—and employers routinely do criminal background checks in hiring—is our society’s “zero tolerance” approach to youth experimentation impeding young people’s travels into a productive adult life?

Provide activities that capitalize on adolescents’ strengths. No matter what your position on these controversial issues (mine should be very clear!), many of you would agree that, rather than focusing on punishment, a positive strategy is best: Foster young people’s passions and strengths.

Youth development programs fulfill this mission. They give adolescents safe places to explore their passions during the late afternoon hours, when teens are most prone to get into trouble while hanging out with their friends (Goldner and others, 2011). From 4-H clubs, to church groups, to high school plays, youth development programs ideally foster qualities that developmentalist Richard Lerner has named the five C’s: competence, confidence, character, caring, and connections. They provide an

Youth development program

Any after-school program, or structured activity outside of the school day, that is devoted to promoting flourishing in teenagers.
environment that allows young people to thrive (Bowers and others, 2010; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003).

I wish I could say that every youth program fostered flourishing. But as anyone who has spent time at a girls’ club or the local Y knows, these settings can encourage group bullying and antisocial acts (Rorie and others, 2011). Therefore, programs must be structured and well supervised. They have to promote the 5 C’s. Moreover, because of the teens who gravitate to these particular activities (testosterone-filled boys!), one study showed, heavy involvement in football and basketball was correlated with getting into more trouble as a teen (Wilson and others, 2010). So rather than just saying, “Afterschool activities are great,” we need to consider the participants and the programs, too.

What we do know is that getting involved in a range of high school extracurricular activities predicts doing well in college (Fredricks & Eccles, 2010). Intense involvement, specifically in high school clubs, foreshadows work success years down the road (Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Linver, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009)—which brings me to that important issue: For the sake of both their present and future, how can we get more teens connected to school?

**Change high schools to provide a better adolescent–environment fit.** Adolescents who feel imbedded in a nurturing school tend to feel good about themselves (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Lewis and others, 2011) and the world (Flanagan & Stout, 2010). School can offer at-risk teens a haven when they are having problems at home (Lounkas, Roalson, & Herrera, 2010).

Unfortunately, however, many Western high schools are not very nurturing places. In one disheartening international poll, although teenagers were generally upbeat about other aspects of their lives, they rated their high school experience as only “so-so” (Gilman and others, 2008). How can we turn this situation around? Again, the experience-sampling method offers clues.

In charting the emotions of students during various high school periods, Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues found that passive activities, such as listening to lectures, almost always produced boredom. Teenagers were happiest when they were directing their own learning, either working on group projects or by themselves (Shernoff and others, 2003). Given that the main mode of instruction in traditional high schools (and, unfortunately, college) involves lectures, it makes sense for many young people to zone out in their classes and find school an unpleasant place.

In surveys, teenagers say that they are yearning for the experiences that characterize high-quality elementary schools (described in Chapter 7)—autonomy-supporting work that encourages them to think and teachers who respect their point of view (LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008); courses that are relevant to their lives (Wagner, 2000). Service-learning classes, involving volunteer activities, in particular, can make a lasting difference in later development (McIntosh, Metz, & Youniss, 2005). Here is what one African American young man had to say about his junior-year course in which he volunteered at a soup kitchen: “I was on the brink of becoming one of those hoodlums the world so fears. This class was one of the major factors in my choosing the right path” (quoted in Yates & Youniss, 1998, p. 509).

Finally, we might rethink the school day to take into account teenagers’ unique sleep requirements. During early adolescence, the sleep cycle is biologically pushed back (Colrain & Baker, 2011; Feinberg & Campbell, 2010). Although adolescents often need at least nine hours of sleep to function at
their best, because they tend to go to bed after 11 and must wake up for school at 6 or 7 A.M., the typical U.S. teen sleeps fewer than 7 hours each day (Colrain & Baker, 2011). Spending your days in a zombie-like state is destined to make even the most intrinsically motivating class torture. It is tailor-made to make any person irritable and depressed. Therefore, simply starting the school day a couple of hours later might go a long way toward reducing adolescent storm and stress!

Think back to your high school—what you found problematic; what helped you cope; what may have allowed you to thrive. Do you have other ideas about how we might change schools, or any other aspect of the environment, to help teenagers make the most of these special years?

Another Perspective on the Teenage Mind

Until this point, I’ve been highlighting the mainstream developmental science message: “Because of their brain immaturity, teens need special help.” Now, let’s consider some different views: Do we know enough about how the brain functions to make these kinds of neural attributions? (As I suggested in the brain imaging Table 9.6 on page 281, some developmental scientists legitimately could answer no) (Epstein, 2010; Sercombe, 2010). Doesn’t the “brain deficit” label ignore the ways that adolescents are very mature? (Males, 2009.) In their push to invoke biology, might academics be overstating the vulnerabilities of the teenage mind?

Perhaps the most vocal critic of the immature adolescent brain position is psychologist Robert Epstein. Epstein (2010) reminds us that the life stage called adolescence is an artificial, twentieth-century construction. Nature intended us to enter adulthood at puberty. Now, he argues, young people may be forced into depression and dangerous risk taking by languishing for a full decade under the ill-fitting label of “child.” How many “predictable” teenage symptoms of storm and stress have little to do with faulty frontal lobes and everything to do with a poor contemporary body-environment fit? Do teenagers really have immature brains, or is our culture to blame for shackling teenagers’ newly adult minds?

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

1. Robin, a teacher, is about to transfer from fourth grade to the local high school, and she is excited by all the things that her older students will be able to do. Based on what you have learned about Piaget’s formal operational stage and Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning, pick out which two new capacities Robin may find among her students.
   a. The high schoolers will be able to memorize poems.
   b. The high schoolers will be able to summarize the plots of stories.
   c. The high schoolers will be able to debate different ideas even if they don’t personally agree with them.
   d. The high schoolers will be able to develop their own moral principles.

2. Eric is the coach of a basketball team. The year-end tournament is tomorrow, and the star forward has the flu and won’t be able to play. Terry, last year’s number one player, offers to fill in—even though this is a violation of the conference rules. Eric agonizes about the ethical issue. Should he deprive his guys of their shot at
the championship, or go against the regulations and put Terry in? How would you reason about this issue? Now, fit your responses into Kohlberg’s categories of moral thought.

3. A 14-year-old worries that everyone is watching every mistake she makes; at the same time, she is fearless when her friends dare her to take life-threatening risks like bungee jumping off a cliff. According to Elkind, this feeling that everyone is watching her illustrates ____________; the risk taking is a sign of _______________; and both are evidence of the overall process called ______________.

4. Your 14-year-old nephew, Sanjay, is spending the Christmas holidays with you. If he is a typical teenager, you can expect which of the following symptoms:
   a. intense mood swings and social sensitivities.
   b. depression, as most adolescents have psychological problems.
   c. a tendency to engage in risky behavior when this normally level-headed kid is with his friends.
   d. few problems if Sanjay is in the popular crowd at school.

5. There has been a rise in teenage crimes in your town, and you are at a community meeting to explore solutions. Given what you know about the teenage mind, which interventions should you definitely support?
   a. Push the state legislature to punish teenage offenders as adults. Let them pay for their crimes!
   b. Encourage the local high school to expand its menu of exciting after-school clubs.
   c. Think about postponing the beginning of the school day to 10 A.M.

6. Imagine you are a college debater. Use your formal operational skills to argue first for and then against the proposition that society should try teens as adults.

Answers to the Tying It All Together questions can be found at the end of this chapter.

Teenage Relationships

What exactly are teenager/parent interactions like? Now, it’s time to tackle this question, as I focus on those two agendas of adolescence—separating from parents; connecting with peers.

Separating from Parents

When I’m with my dad fishing, or when my family is just joking around at dinner—it’s times like these when I feel completely content, loved, the best about life and myself. In their original experience-sampling study, Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) discovered that teenagers’ most uplifting experiences occurred when they were with their families—sharing a joke around the dinner table or having a close moment with mom or dad. Unfortunately, however, taken as a whole, those moments were few. In fact, when adolescents were with their families, unhappy emotions outweighed positive ones 10 to 1.

The Issue: Pushing for Autonomy

Why does family life produce a few peak moments and so many lows? As developmentalists point out, if our home life is good, our family provides our cocoon. Home is the place where we can relax, be totally ourselves, and feel completely loved. However, in addition to being our safe haven, our parents must be a source of pain. The reason is that parents’ job is both to love us and to limit us. When this parental limiting function gets into high gear, teenage distress becomes acute. Consider this complaint from a child in the original experience-sampling study:

Finally, I get a Sunday off…, so I can sleep a little later. But now I have to go to church. . . . They always wake you up, and they act like they are always cheerful . . . but they are
really hostile if you don’t want to go . . . [then on the way things get worse]. . . I asked them to change the channel—they were listening to some opera stuff. They just ignored me. . . . Jesus Christ, at least they could answer me!

(quoted in Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984, p. 141)

What do teenagers and their parents argue about? Studies dating from the Depression era, to the 1960s, to today agree: Conflicts do not typically occur over large concerns such as politics, the state of the world, or even the merits of being religious, but rather the minutiae of daily life—going to church, doing your homework, or cleaning your room (Daddis, 2011; Laursen & Collins, 1994; Montemayer, 1983; Smetana, Daddis, & Chuang, 2003). Conflicts relating to independence loom large (“Why can’t I stay out late? Everyone at school is going to that party. You have too many rules!”). The most intense differences of opinion occur just when peer group popularity pressures reach their height—around the early to middle teens (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009). And just as parents suspect, young teens do often overestimate the freedoms their friends have! (See Daddis, 2011.)

The Process: Separating to Become Close in a New Way

Actually, parent–adolescent conflict tends to flare up while children are in the midst of puberty (Steinberg, 2005). When Steinberg and a colleague videotaped sons and mothers interacting, they found that if a boy was undergoing puberty, he was most likely to challenge, to contradict, and to argue with his parent’s point of view (Steinberg & Hill, 1978). From an evolutionary perspective, the hormonal surges of puberty may propel this struggle for autonomy (“You can’t tell me what do!”) that sets in motion the dance of separation intrinsic to becoming an independent adult.

Even the physical changes of puberty may promote the impulse to separate. Parents are probably less interested in cuddling their suddenly shaving six-foot-tall son or having their 120-pound daughter sit on their lap. Being that pre-teens find the “symptoms” of puberty so embarrassing (recall Chapter 8), children may also put a halt to much of the kissing and hugging as they struggle to hide their developing bodies from their family’s sight.

As teenagers push for freedom, they are given more decision-making opportunities and establish a new, more equal, adult-like relationship with their moms and dads. Although conflict may be intense through mid-adolescence, there is a dramatic shift toward freedom during the later teenage years (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009).

By late adolescence, parents simply trust their more responsible, less rebellious teens more (Wray-Lake, Crouter, & McHale, 2010). Now, it’s important for young people to get it together and start preparing for college or a career. The agenda shifts to constructing an adult life. Even the major social markers of independence at around age 16 or 17 eliminate sources of family strain. Think about how getting your first job, or your license, removed an important area of family conflict. You no longer had to ask your parents for every dime or rely on mom or dad to get around.

These adult landmarks put distance between parents and teenagers in the most basic physical way. The experience-sampling charts showed that ninth-graders spent 25 percent of their time with family members. Among high school seniors, the figure dropped to 14 percent (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984).

So the process of separating from our families makes it possible to have a more harmonious family life. The delicate task for parents, as I suggested earlier, is to give teens space to explore their new, adult selves and still remain closely
involved (Steinberg, 2001). One mother of a teenager explained what ideally should happen, when she said: “I don’t treat her like a young child anymore, but we’re still very, very close. Sort of like a friendship, but not really, because I’m still in charge. She’s my buddy” (quoted in Shearer, Crouter, & McHale, 2005, p. 674).

Cultural Variations on a Theme

My parents won’t let me date anyone who isn’t Hindi—or go to parties. They never tell me they love me. I have to be at home right after school to do the grocery shopping and other family chores. Why can’t they just let me be a normal American kid?

As researchers point out, with immigrant adolescents, the normal impulse to separate can be exacerbated by issues relating to acculturation (Kim & Park, 2011; Park and others, 2010; Wu & Chao, 2011). Teens want to become “real” Americans. They may think: “My parents have old-fashioned attitudes. Their values have nothing to do with my life.” As Judith Harris’s peer group socialization theory might predict (recall Chapter 7), with immigrant adolescents, parent-child disagreements may go beyond bickering about family rules to involve a fundamental difference in worldviews (Arnett, 1999).

Family pressures, as you saw in the example above, present special hurdles for immigrant teens. Heavy responsibilities at home make it difficult for any person to thrive at the most nurturing school (Wilkinson-Lee and others, 2011). In addition, straddling two cultures can upend the normal parent-child relationship—catapulting some second-generation children into becoming the family adults. As one teacher who works with Chinese immigrants commented, “The kids may be doing the interpreting and translating…. they may be the de facto parents” (quoted in Lim and others, 2009).

Given these strains, are immigrant teens at risk for poor parent-child relations? The answer is, “it depends.” Rules that seem rigid to Western eyes have a different meaning when young people understand that their parents have sacrificed everything for their well-being (Wu & Chao, 2011). As one touching, international poll showed, the core quality that makes adolescents feel loved worldwide is feeling their parents have gone out of their way to do things that are rare and emotionally hard (McNeely & Barber, 2010).

So, knowing one’s parents made a rare sacrifice (“giving up their happiness and moving for my future”) has the potential to create unusually close parent-child bonds. This sense of family mission may help explain what researchers call the immigrant paradox. Despite coping with an overload of stresses (Cho & Haslam, 2010), many immigrant children living in poverty do better academically than their peers (van Geel & Vedder, 2011). But like all children, immigrant teens take different paths—some flourish and others flounder (Suárez-Orozco and others, 2010). One force can be critical in predicting failure or success—no surprise, it’s a person’s group of peers.
Connecting in Groups

Go to your local mall and watch sixth and seventh graders hanging out to get a first-hand glimpse of the group passion that takes over during the early teens. Now that we understand peer group’s potentially destructive effects, let’s turn to the vital positive functions pre-teen peer groups serve.

Defining Groups by Size: Cliques and Crowds

Developmentalists classify teenage peer groups into categories. **Cliqu**es are intimate groups having a membership size of about six. Your group of closest friends would constitute a clique. **Crowds** are larger groupings. Your crowd comprises both your best buddies and a more loose-knit set of people you get together with less regularly.

In a 1960s observational study in Sydney, Australia, one researcher found that these groups serve a crucial purpose: They are the vehicles that convey teenagers to relationships with the opposite sex (Dunphy, 1963).

As you can see in the photos in Figure 9.5, children enter their pre-teen years belonging to unisex cliques, the close associations of same-gender best friends that I talked about in Chapter 6. Relationships start to change when cliques of boys and girls enter a public space and “accidentally” meet. At the mall, notice the bands of sixth- or seventh-grade girls who have supposedly arrived to check out the stores, but who really have another agenda: They know that Sam or José and his buddies will be there. A major mode of interaction when these groups meet is loud teasing. When several cliques get together to walk around the stores, they have melded into that larger, first genuinely mixed-sex group called a crowd (Cotterell, 1996).

The crowd is an ideal medium to bridge the gap between the sexes because there is safety in numbers. Children can still be with their own gender while they are crossing into that “foreign” land. Gradually, out of these large-group experiences, small heterosexual cliques form. You may recall this stage during high school, when your dating activities occurred in a small group of girls and boys. Finally, at the end of adolescence, the structure collapses. It seems babyish to get together as a group. You want to be with your romantic partner alone.

You might be surprised to know that the progression outlined in this 50-year-old research still rings true (Child Trends Data Bank, 2008): First, teenagers get together in large mixed-sex crowds; next, they align into smaller heterosexual groups; then, they form one-to-one relationships, or date.

**What Is the Purpose of Crowds?**

Crowds have other functions. They allow teenagers to connect with people who share their values. Just as we select friends who fit our personalities, we gravitate to the crowd that fits our interests. We disengage from a crowd when its values diverge from ours. As one academically focused teenager lamented: “I see some of my friends changing. . . . They are getting into parties and alcohol. . . . We used to be good friends . . . and now, I can’t really relate to them . . . . That’s kind of sad” (quoted in Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998, p. 60).

**Clique** A small peer group composed of roughly six teenagers who have similar attitudes and who share activities.

**Crowd** A relatively large teen-age peer group.
Crowds, actually, serve as a roadmap, allowing teens to connect with “our kind of people” in an overwhelming social world (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). Interestingly, it’s mainly in large high schools that teens align into defined crowds such as “the Goths” or “the brains,” who share activities, attitudes, and a special type of dress. Therefore, one developmentalist suggested that a school’s size plays a vital role in promoting the teenage crowd (Cotterell, 1996). When your classes are filled with unfamiliar faces, it is helpful to develop a mechanism for finding a smaller set of people just like you. Teenagers adopt a specific look—like having blue hair and wearing grungy jeans—to signal: “I’m your type of person. It’s okay to be friends with me.”

What Are the Kinds of Crowds?

In affluent societies, there is consistency in the major crowd categories. The intellectuals (also called brains, nerds, grinds, or geeks), the popular kids (also known as hotshots, preppies, elites, princesses), the deviants (burnouts, dirts, freaks, druggies, potheads), and a residual type (Goths, alternatives, grubs, loners, independents) appear in high schools throughout the West (Sussman and others, 2007).

How much mixing occurs between different crowds? As it turns out, many teens straddle different crowds (Lonardo and others, 2009). However, adolescents typically tend to be friends with children in fairly similar groups. So a boy in the high-status jock crowd would tend to associate with the popular kids. He would have little to do with the groups that were socially very different, such as the deviants (or the bad kids).

Moreover, as should come as no surprise, the jocks and the popular kids are indeed the highest-status crowds. As I implied earlier in this chapter, because being brainy can involve going against the group norms, “intellectuality” (and advertising one’s intelligence) does not gain teenagers kudos in their peer world, at least in the standard public high school (Sussman and others, 2007).

![Figure 9.6: Feelings of depression in late elementary school and high school, for children who ended up in three different high school crowds.](image-url)
A study tracking children’s self-esteem, as they moved from elementary school into high school, documents exactly how being brainy can be transformed from a plus to a greater teenage liability, and also charts the wider peer group scene (Prinstein & La Greca, 2002). Notice in Figure 9.6 that children who end up in the popular kids and jocks crowds became more self-confident during adolescence. (These are the people who would tell you, “I wasn’t very happy in elementary school, but high school was my best time of life.”) The brains group followed the opposite path—happiest during elementary school, less self-confident as teens.

Finally, notice that the teenagers in the deviant burnout group tend to be most depressed before adolescence and stay at the low end of the happiness continuum in high school (see also Heaven, Ciarrochi, & Vialle, 2008). We already know that failing in middle childhood predicts gravitating toward groups of “bad” peers. Now, let’s explore why joining that bad crowd makes a teenager even more likely to fail.

“Bad Crowds”
The classic defense that parents give for a teenager’s delinquent behavior is, “My child got involved with a bad crowd.” Without ignoring the principle of selection (birds of a feather flock together), there are powerful reasons why bad crowds do cause kids to do bad things.

For one thing, as we know, teenagers are incredibly swayed by their peers. Moreover, each group has a leader, the person who most embodies the group’s goals. So, if a child joins the brains group, his school performance is apt to improve because everyone is jockeying for status by competing for grades. (Cook, Deng, and Morgano, 2007; Molloy, Gest, & Rulison, 2011). However, in delinquent groups, the pressure is to model the most antisocial member. Therefore, the activities of this most acting-out leader set the standard for how the others want to behave.

So, in the same way you felt compelled to jump into the icy water at camp when the bravest of your bunkmates took the plunge, if one group member begins selling guns or drugs, the rest must follow the leader or be called “chicken.” Moreover, when children compete for status by getting into trouble, this creates ever-wilder antisocial modeling and propels the group toward taking increasingly risky actions.

Combine this principle with the impact of just being in a group. When young people get together, a group high occurs. Talk gets louder and more outrageous. People act in ways that would be unthinkable if they were alone. From rioting at rock concerts to being in a car with your buddies during a drive-by shooting (recall the earlier Experiencing the Lifespan box), groups do cause people to act in dangerous ways (Cotterell, 1996).

By videotaping groups of boys, developmentalists have documented the deviancy training, or socialization into delinquency, that occurs as a function of simply talking with friends in a group (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Rorie and others, 2011). The researchers find that at-risk pre-teens forge friendships through specific kinds of conversations: They laugh; egg one another on; reinforce one another as they discuss committing antisocial acts. So peer interactions in early adolescence are a medium by which problem behavior gets established, solidified, and entrenched.

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The lure of entering an antisocial peer group is especially strong for at-risk kids because they are already feeling “it’s me against the world” (Veenstra and others, 2010). Put yourself in the place of a child whose executive function deficits are causing him to get rejected by the “regular” kids. You need to connect with other children like yourself because you have failed at gaining entry anywhere else. Once in the group, your hostile attributional bias is reinforced by your buddies. Your friends tell you that it’s fine to go against the system. You are finally finding acceptance in an unfriendly world.

In middle-class settings, popular kids, as I mentioned earlier, can get into trouble, especially during the early teenage years. “Self-identifying” as a jock is actually a risk factor for abusing alcohol or having unprotected sex (Cook, Deng, & Morgano, 2007). (At this point, any reader who has lived through adolescence is probably saying, “Duh!”) But in affluent communities, it tends to be children with prior problems who gravitate toward the druggy or delinquent groups. In economically deprived neighborhoods, however, there may be few achievers to hang out with. Flourishing is difficult because the community is a toxic place. The only major crowd may be the antisocial group called a gang.

Society’s Nightmare Crowd: Teenage Gangs

The gang, a close-knit, delinquent peer group, embodies society’s worst nightmares. Gang members share a collective identity, which they often express by adopting specific symbols and claiming control over a certain territory or turf (Shelden, Tracy, & Brown, 1997). This predominantly male group is found in different cultures and historical eras; however, with gangs, the socioeconomic context looms large: Adverse economic conditions promote gangs (again for a vivid example, turn back to the last Experiencing the Lifespan box).

Gangs provide teenagers with status. They offer physical protection in dangerous neighborhoods (Shelden, Tracy, & Brown, 1997). When young people have few options for making it in the conventional way, gangs offer a pathway to making a living (for example, by selling drugs or stealing). So, in dangerous neighborhoods, what starts as time-limited adolescent turmoil is more likely to turn into a life-course criminal career.

This suggests that moving inner city children to safe middle-class communities might turn them around. Not so fast! When impoverished ghetto families were randomly assigned by lottery to move to subsidized housing in an affluent suburban town, the “mover” teenagers actually did worse than the children who were left behind! (Fauth, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; see Figure 9.7.) When we think more deeply, it makes sense that simply relocating disadvantaged children to a potentially unfriendly place might backfire. If a specific group is defined as “not like us”—in this case, rejected as “those scary kids who live in subsidized housing”—these young people will feel more isolated from a caring community than before. Again, it takes a whole nurturing village for adolescents to thrive.

**Figure 9.7:** Rates of substance abuse for inner-city children who moved to a middle-class community and those who stayed. In the “moving to opportunity” study, children who were relocated from an inner-city neighborhood to an affluent community ended up worse off as teens than those who remained. This graph shows the upsetting findings with regard to substance abuse. Source: Fauth, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007.
A Note on Adolescence Worldwide

It also takes a kinder, gentler society for adolescence to exist. So, children growing up in impoverished areas of the world are less apt to have this extra decade insulated from adult life. Unfortunately, adolescence has been eliminated for the approximately 1 million children who enter the sex trade every year (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2002a). Some of these boys and girls are street children, living in gangs in cities in Latin America and Southeast Asia. Or destitute parents may sell their daughters into the sex industry in order for the family to survive (Gajic-Veljanowski & Stewart, 2007).

Adolescence has been eliminated for the hundreds of thousands of child soldiers. Many combatants in the poorest regions of the globe are teenage boys. Some are coerced into fighting as young as age 10 or 8 (Child Soldiers Global Report, 2008; UNICEF, 2002a).

Yes, many teenagers in the world’s affluent areas are flourishing. But children in the least-developed regions of the globe may not have the chance to be teenagers or construct a decent adult life. Although critics, such as Robert Epstein, bemoan the shackles of Western teens, having an extra decade liberated from grown-up responsibilities can be critical to flourishing during the adult years.

How can you personally flourish during your adult years? Stay tuned for a wealth of research relating to this question in the next part of the book.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

1. Chris and her parents are arguing again. If they’re like most families, you can be pretty sure that their arguments concern which of the following topics?
   a. How their community treats the homeless
   b. How late Chris’s curfew should be
   c. Issues such as Chris’s cleaning her room and doing chores

2. Based on this chapter, at what age might arguments between Chris and her parents be most intense: age 14, 18, or 21?

3. Your niece Heather hangs around with a small group of girlfriends. You see them at the mall giggling at a group of boys. According to the standard pattern, what is the next step?
   a. Heather and her friends will begin going on dates with the boys.
   b. Heather and her clique will meld into a large heterosexual crowd.
   c. Heather and her clique will form another small clique composed of both girls and boys.

4. Mom #1 says, “Getting involved with the ‘bad kids’ makes teens get into trouble.” Mom #2 disagrees: “It’s the kid’s personality that causes him to get into trouble.” Mom #3 says, “You both are correct—but also partly wrong. ‘The kid’s personality causes him to gravitate toward the ‘bad kids,’ and then that peer group encourages antisocial acts.” Which mother is right?

5. You want to intervene to help prevent at-risk pre-teens from becoming delinquents. First, devise a checklist to assess who might be appropriate for your program. Then, applying the principles in this chapter, offer suggestions for how you would turn potentially “troublemaking teens” around.

Answers to the Tying It All Together questions can be found at the end of this chapter.
The Mysterious Teenage Mind

Wise observers have described the “hotheaded” qualities of youth for millennia. However, adolescence, first identified by G. Stanley Hall in the early 1900s and characterized by “storm and stress,” became a life stage in the United States during the twentieth century, when high school became universal and “isolated” teens together as a group.

Jean Piaget believes that when teenagers reach the formal operational stage, they can think abstractly about hypothetical possibilities and reason scientifically. Although even most adults don’t typically reason like scientists, older teenagers use the skills involved in formal operations to plan their adult futures.

According to Lawrence Kohlberg, reaching formal operations makes it possible for teenagers to develop moral values that guide their lives. By examining how they reason about ethical dilemmas, Kohlberg has classified people at the preconventional level (a level of moral judgment in which only punishment and reward are important); the conventional level (moral judgment that is based on obeying social norms); and the highest, postconventional level (moral reasoning that is based on one’s own moral ideals, apart from society’s rules). Despite the fact that Kohlberg’s criteria for measuring morality has serious problems, adolescence is when we become attuned to society’s flaws.

According to David Elkind, this ability to evaluate the flaws of the adult world produces adolescent egocentrism. The imaginary audience (the feeling that everyone is watching everything one does) and the personal fable (feeling invincible and utterly unique) are two components of this intense early-teenage sensitivity to what others think.

Studies suggest that many, but not all, storm-and-stress stereotypes about teenagerhood are true. Adolescents are highly social and sensitive and attuned to immediate reinforcements. In arousing situations, they are more influenced by their peers. This risk-taking (and sometimes law breaking) propensity, especially with friends, makes adolescence a potentially dangerous time. Research, using the experience-sampling technique, shows teens are more emotionally intense than adults. Contrary to our stereotypes, however, most adolescents are upbeat, and happy. Still, rates of nonsuicidal self-injury and depression rise during adolescence—especially among females. The push to be in the popular crowd may help explain both the upsurge in acting out and unhappiness during the tumultuous pubertal years.

The minority of teenagers who get into serious trouble tend to have prior emotional and school problems, feel distant from their families (and create more family distance), and live in nonnurturing communities. Being connected to academics and having personal and wider-world resources helps teens thrive. However, even adolescents who are succeeding experiment with forbidden activities, and even serious adolescence-limited turmoil may not lead to life-course difficulties. Many problem teens construct fulfilling adult lives.

The unique characteristics of the developing teenage brain may make early adolescence a relatively dangerous life stage. The frontal lobes are still maturing. Puberty heightens teenagers’ social sensitivities and emotional states. The lessons for society are: Don’t punish teenagers who break the law in the same ways that adult offenders are punished; rethink our contemporary U.S. zero-tolerance attitude to normal teenage experimentation; and, most of all, channel teenage passions in a positive way through high-quality youth development programs. We also need to make high school more appealing and adjust the school day to fit adolescent sleep needs. While the “immature brain” conception of adolescence is currently in vogue, critics suggest that it minimizes teenagers’ strengths.

Teenage Relationships

Teenagers’ conflicts with their parents tend to center on mundane issues (cleaning up their room, curfew, and so on), and struggles are most intense during puberty. In late adolescence, children ideally develop a more adult, friend-like relationship with their parents. Although the immigrant paradox suggests they can do remarkably well, some immigrant teens from families with collectivist values face unique issues relating to acculturation and family separation stresses.

Teenage peer groups comprise cliques and crowds. These differentiated groups convey adolescents, in stages, toward romantic involvement. Crowds, such as the jocks or the brains, give teenagers an easy way of finding people like themselves in large high schools. The popular kids and the jocks (in contrast to the lower-status brains) feel better about themselves in high school than during elementary school. Children who enter delinquent groups tend to be unhappy before high school and remain distressed during their teenage years.

Entering a “bad crowd” smoothes the way to antisocial behavior because group members model the most antisocial leader and compete for leadership by performing delinquent acts. Deviancy training, in which pre-teens egg one another on by talking about doing dangerous things, leads directly to delinquency as at-risk children travel into high school. Gangs, mainly male teenage peer groups that engage in criminal acts, are most common in impoverished communities. In poor regions of the world, young people may not have any adolescence at all.
The Mysterious Teenage Mind

1. c and d

2. If your arguments centered on getting punished or rewarded (the coach needs to put Terry in because that’s his best shot at winning; or, the coach can’t put Terry in because, if someone finds out, he will be in trouble), you are reasoning at the pre-conventional level. Comments such as “going against the rules is wrong” might be classified as conventional. If you argued, “Putting Terry in goes against my values, no matter what the team or the rules say,” your response might qualify as post-conventional.

3. the imaginary audience; the personal fable; adolescent egocentrism

4. a and c

5. b and c

6. Trying teens as adults. Pro arguments: Kohlberg’s theory clearly implies teens know right from wrong, so if teens knowingly do the crime, they should “do the time.” Actually, the critical dimension in deciding on adult punishment should be a person’s culpability—premeditation, seriousness of the infraction, etc., not age. Why is a person emotionally a child at 17 and suddenly “a responsible adult” on his 18th birthday? Con arguments: The research in this chapter suggests that teens are indeed biologically and behaviorally different, so it is cruel to judge their behavior by adult standards. Moreover, if society bars young people from voting or serving in the military until age 18, it’s blatantly unfair to decide that adolescents are adult enough to be in prison at 16 or 15.

Teenage Relationships

1. b and c

2. At age 14

3. b

4. Mom #3 is correct.

5. Checklist: (1) Is this child unusually aggressive? (2) Is he failing at school and being rejected by the mainstream kids? (3) Does this child have poor relationships with his parents? (4) Does he live in a dangerous community? (Or, because he is poor, is he being defined as “dangerous” by the community?) Your possible program: Provide positive extracurricular activities and nurture each child’s interests. Offer service-learning opportunities. Possibly, institute group sessions with parents to solve problems around certain issues. Definitely try to get these teens connected with caring mentors and a different set of (prosocial) friends.