

*So, what is the deal—
what do I gotta believe
to get to heaven?*

A continuation of Fowler's *synthetic-conventional* stage with even greater levels of synthesis being attempted because a young adolescent's experience is greater than that of a preteen. She naturally comes into greater contact with other people, especially those who are different. In addition, her greater ability to think in an abstract way means that she is having an easier time placing herself in someone else's place than she ever could have done as a preteen. She is better able to see that every story has two sides, every issue has at least two viewpoints. All this means that her ability to synthesize is increasing, while her desire to remain "conventional" is decreasing, unless the peer group to which she belongs is conventional. For a greater discussion of this topic, see the corresponding section under "Preteens Years."

Major Phases Beginning in Young Adolescents

A number of the phases discussed in the section under "Preteen Years" are still operant at this age as well and should be reviewed. Some additional ones follow.

Invincibility
Wouldn't have believed
that world could change so quickly—
car crash wake-up call.

Young adolescents believe that nothing bad will happen to them. Because they are usually in good physical condition, they believe that they are not at risk for illnesses, injuries, or negative consequences of sexual activity, smoking, alcohol, and drug use. They believe that they are too smart (see below) to do anything stupid, to get caught, to get into trouble, or to get hurt.

In one way, a sense of invincibility is wonderful, because it means that the young person is probably not anxious or tentative in his overtures to the world. On the other hand, a sense of invincibility can get a young person into serious trouble if he gets too cocky and takes foolish risks. Although boys are more likely to demonstrate this behavior than are girls, both genders are affected.

Although we would not want adolescents to lose their zest for life or their physical health, we do want them to be realistic. So, it is good to discuss the way of the world with them, not in a preachy sort of way but in an honest manner, allowing lots of time for questions, impressions, and suggestions for how situations or people can be handled.

“I’m too smart for that”

*Trusting much too much
in resources not mature,
his mind races on.*

This statement is directly related to the one preceding, and is a reflection of the young person’s sense of invincibility. In other words, “Bad things happen to others because they’re not as smart or as aware as I am. Because I am smart and

aware, I will be protected from bad stuff or people.” Oh that it would be that easy! Plenty of smart people have been seriously injured in car crashes; become terminally ill; gotten hooked on drugs, cigarettes, or booze; or been arrested. It takes only a momentary lapse in judgment to create many years of problems and sorrow.

So, we do want to emphasize that young people *do* need to be smart and aware—aware that the dangers are real and can happen to anyone. Adults do not need to “scare” young adolescents, but they need to be realistic in their discussions about the bad things that can happen. Such adults do well to avoid being perceived as sarcastic, rude, angry, or condescending in their discussions about many matters with teens, for if teens perceive any of these attitudes, they will not be able to really hear what these adults are saying—no matter how right it is.

*Experimentation with
alcohol, tobacco, drugs, sex*

*'Twas only one time—
would never have done it more.
Got burned just the same.*

Some young adolescents experiment with sex, tobacco, alcohol, or drugs as an attempt to fit in with an admired crowd that endorses such experimentation. Other young adolescents do so because they are trying to rebel against parents, test their limits, or are simply curious. Still others experiment because they are sad or lonely, and they believe that these substances or behaviors will alleviate their bad feelings.

Many adolescents believe the word on the street: adults do not want kids to engage in such behaviors because they do not want teens to have fun. They reason, “I bet the adults did all this stuff when they were kids, so why can’t we?”

The reason for the experimentation must be sought so that help might be offered. Yet, regardless of the reasons for experimentation, young adolescents need to know the truth about all these activities. Each of these activities can have serious, even deadly, consequences. The best person to discuss these matters should be the young person’s parent, but sometimes a parent smokes or drinks to excess herself, limiting her credibility. Or, a divorced father has numerous “sleep-over” girlfriends. How can his son believe him if he talks about the dangers of sex at a young age? In the absence of a credible parent, teachers can discuss these matters, or they can bring in a doctor or other respected authority figure. Many times, the best speaker is a young adult who has been “burned” by the very behaviors that the young adolescents want to try. This is especially true if this young man or woman has a connection to the group, such as a member of the same church, graduate of the same school, resident of the same neighborhood. The more like the young adolescents this speaker is, the more likely they are to listen to him or her.

Questions whether God exists

*Looking at the mess
of this old world all around—
doubting that God is.*

In their early adolescent years, some adolescents question whether God exists. Maybe they've seen a program on TV or read an article about God's existence. Maybe they've heard others talk. No matter the source, young people themselves start to ask questions about evil in the world and why God doesn't stop it. As one fourteen-year-old said, "I see all the bad stuff, and, if I were God, I'd want it to all go away. If God is powerful, God could make it go away. If God loves us like everyone says he does, he'd want it to go away. But the bad stuff is still here. So, you gotta wonder, 'Is there really a God out there?'"

As with many other developmental tasks in this age group, permitting open discussions about God, the presence of evil in the world, and the degree to which free will is involved can start many young adolescents thinking seriously about the big issues rather than reacting to them. As we can see from Scripture, God is not angered by questions, even from the prophets and psalmists. Otherwise they would have been eliminated before they could even have written a word! Review these parts of Scripture and share them with young people.

Summary • Questions • Resources

As her physical and intellectual skills are rapidly maturing, the young adolescent looks increasingly to her peer group for "norms" of behavior—what's in and what's out. This might cause problems if she does the wrong thing simply to please members of her group. As the attraction to the opposite sex increases, she might spend more and more time in front of

the mirror, voicing her dissatisfaction with her perfectly wonderful appearance. Her opinion of herself is usually not entirely accurate, as one day she thinks that she is an ugly failure (she isn't) and the next day she thinks that nothing can happen to her because she's too smart (she's wrong). She might seriously question the religion of her heritage, especially if she sees significant adults acting in hypocritical ways. Fully aware of the media and others' opinions, she wonders if there even is a God. Looking at the world, she cannot tell if there is. Adults in her life are called to show her God's presence in their words and actions.

Questions—Catechists

- A few students in the ninth-grade confirmation class say that they don't really believe in God. What would you say?
- What would you say to a thirteen-year-old boy who says that sex with lots of people must be good because that's what his dad does? Would you speak to his father as well?
- How would you impress upon a group of eighth-graders the dangers inherent in Internet chatrooms?

Questions—Parents

- What would be your approach if you found your fourteen-year-old son on an Internet porn site?

- What would you say to your fifteen-year-old daughter whose response to every piece of parental advice is, “Don’t worry. I’m too smart for that?”
- What would be your approach if your thirteen-year-old son has no friends and prefers to be alone?

Resources

- Erikson, Erik: *Childhood and Society*. New York: WW Norton & Co., 1985 [especially chapter 7].
- Fowler, James: *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995 [especially chapter 18].
- Kuhmerker, Lisa: *The Kohlberg Legacy for the Helping Professions*. Birmingham, Ala.: R.E.P. Books, 1991 [especially table on pages 28–29].
- Pruitt, David (ed): *Your Adolescent: Emotional, Behavioral, and Cognitive Development from Early Adolescence through the Teen Years*. New York: HarperResource, 2000 [especially chapter 1]. [Excellent reference book.]
- Siberry, George, and Robert Iannone (eds): *The Harriet Lane Handbook*. St. Louis: Mosby, 2000 [especially chapter 9].
- Singer, Dorothy, and Tracey Revenson: *A Piaget Primer: How a Child Thinks*. New York: New American Library, 1978 [especially chapter 2].