

Development of Autonomy in Adolescence

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Autonomy refers to a person’s ability to think, feel and make decisions on his/her own. This NebGuide explains how adolescents achieve autonomy and how adults can help.

Teens and Autonomy

One of the most important tasks for all adolescents is learning the skills that will help them manage their own lives and make positive, healthy choices. Parents and others can help youth develop this sense of self-governance, responsibility, independence, and decision-making, which are together called **autonomy**.

What is Autonomy?

Autonomy refers to an adolescent’s growing ability to think, feel, make decisions, and act on her or his own. The development of autonomy does not end after the teen years. Throughout adulthood, autonomy continues to develop whenever someone is challenged to act with a new level of self-reliance. Autonomy has special meaning during the preteen and teen years because it signifies that an adolescent is a unique, capable, independent person who depends less on parents and other adults.

“Although we often use the words *autonomy* and *independence* interchangeably, in the study of adolescence they mean slightly different things. Independence generally refers to teens’ capacity to behave on their own. The growth of independence is surely a part of becoming autonomous during adolescence, but autonomy means more than behaving independently. It also means thinking, feeling, and making moral decisions that are truly your own, rather than following along with what others believe.”

[Steinberg, L. (1999). *Adolescence* (5th Ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill, p. 276.]

Why is Autonomy Important?

Adolescents develop autonomy through their relationships in their families and with people outside of their families. Generally, during the preteen and teen years they begin to have more opportunities to govern their own behavior. In today’s world, many adolescents spend a great deal of time outside of direct **supervision** by adults. As parents and communities struggle to meet the demands of work and family, it is critical for adolescents to develop **healthy self-governance** of their behavior. Three types of self-governance include:

- **Decision-making**
- **Self-reliance**
- **Conformity**

Decision-making abilities improve as we get older. During adolescence we become able to think in the abstract, weigh options, and look ahead to see the possible consequences of our actions. We begin to recognize the value of advice from others. We also begin to realize that advice from others may be influenced by their personal opinions.

Feelings of **self-reliance** also generally increase with age. However, there is an interesting catch: youth often think they are acting on their own accord, but adults may believe that a youth’s decisions are being influenced by friends.

Conformity also is an important issue during the teenage years. Conformity is sometimes thought of as “peer pressure.” It means following along with the behaviors or opinions of friends or others. Youth are most prone to peer conformity during the middle adolescent years – in about seventh and eighth grades. Younger adolescents are usually more influenced by parents. Peer pressure increases as teens grow older, but eventually most teens are less affected by peer pressure because they learn to make decisions independently of their peers.

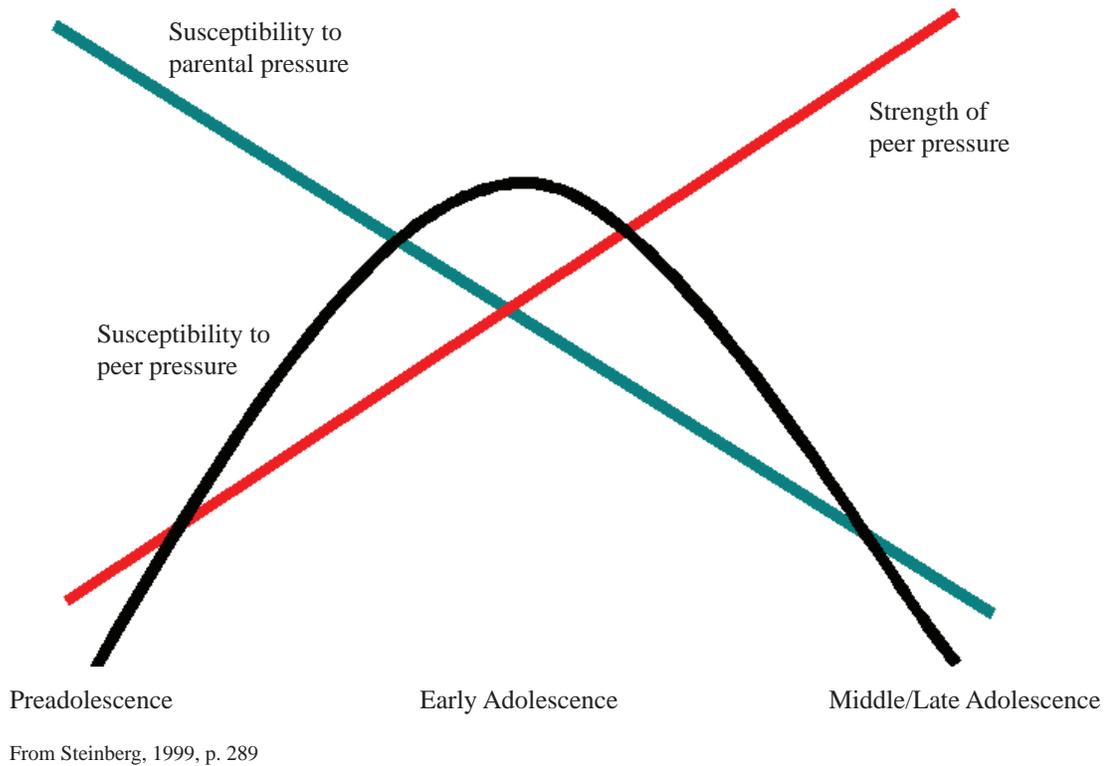


Figure 1.

Three Types of Autonomy

There are **three types** of autonomy:

1. **Emotional Autonomy**
2. **Behavioral Autonomy**
3. **Value Autonomy**

Emotional autonomy relates to emotions, personal feelings and how we relate to the people around us.

During early adolescence, youth shift from depending on parents to getting emotional support from others, such as peers. At this time, youth begin to see their parents for the first time as “real” people who have faults and strengths. Youth become more deeply involved in relationships with friends, and they begin to develop intimate relationships.

When problems arise, emotionally autonomous teens are more able to look for their own solutions or ask friends or adults outside the family for support rather than relying only on parents. As the figure on peer conformity (above) shows, when adolescents begin to exert their emotional autonomy from parents, they may rely more on their peers than parents. This occurs during the early to middle teenage years. By the late teenage years, adolescents are more self-reliant and do not rely as much on parents or peers.

Behavioral autonomy is related to behaviors. It refers to the ability to make decisions independently and to follow through on these decisions with actions.

As young people mature, their styles of thinking also grow and change. They realize there are many ways to view any situation. They begin to seek out the advice of others and are

capable of comparing one choice to another. They also think about the results of their decisions. They learn that everyone has their own biases, and they start to feel more confident in their own decision-making abilities.

As with emotional autonomy, it is important to be aware that conforming to peer pressure by teens can sometimes be mistaken for behavioral autonomy from parents. Even though teens may stop asking parents for advice, that doesn’t mean they are acting on their own accord. They may be relying on friends instead. In this case, the teen is not being autonomous. True behavioral autonomy requires that the teen act on her or his own, rather than simply following along with others, whether those others are parents or friends. Behavioral autonomy is usually achieved between the ages of 15 and 18.

Value autonomy means having independent attitudes and beliefs regarding spirituality, politics, and morals.

Adolescents’ ability to think in the abstract helps them see the differences between general and specific situations, and to make judgments using higher-level thinking. Development of value autonomy means that teens take time to consider their personal value systems. In this way, teens come to their own independent conclusions about their values, rather than simply accepting the values of their friends or values that they were brought up to follow.

Autonomy develops at different times for different people. Not all 15-year-olds have the same level of behavioral autonomy. Similarly, one type of autonomy may develop more quickly than the other type. For example, an adolescent may be good at thinking independently, but may not feel comfortable taking action on those thoughts.

Autonomy and Family Problems

Development of autonomy helps prepare young people to make decisions and take care of themselves. Yet, attempts at autonomy are sometimes blamed for fighting that goes on between parents and adolescents. For many people, **family turmoil and rebellion** go hand in hand with adolescence.

For a long time, it was believed that detachment from parents was a normal part of growing up, and that family conflict was a normal part of the teenage years. However, research has found that most families stay close during the teenage years. Rather than a process of separation, most families experience a change, or **transformation**, in family relationships as adolescents develop a sense of autonomy.

During this time, teenagers begin to see their **parents as human**, and to take more and more responsibility for their own choices and actions. Often there are more quarrels at this time because adolescents want more independence and parents want more closeness and communication. Yet these arguments do not usually lead to lasting problems.

How Can Adults Help?

- **Set clear and consistent expectations.** It also is important for adults and adolescents to be open to talking about rules, and maybe revising them together. If adults are **flexible** and are good **listeners**, adolescents will be more likely to turn to them for advice and guidance.
- **Communicate openly.** As children grow up and are faced with new decisions, there should be **open family discussion** about family and school rules and values. Some rules will need to be adjusted to meet adolescents' changing needs. Youth want and need to learn to manage their own lives, but they also must have guidance and support from the family and community. Talk about values with your teen, even when the topics are tough!

As autonomy develops, it is natural for adolescents to turn more to peers for assistance, and less to parents. Adults should try not to put down or make fun of the opinions of their teen's friends. Don't condemn teens for listening to the advice of friends. Instead, talk about it. Ask what their friends would do in a similar situation and why. Then encourage teens to examine the real reasons behind a friend's opinion, and to think about the situation from different points-of-view.

- **Discourage rebellion.** Teens sometimes **rebel against**, or resist, parents and other forms of authority. How can parents help avoid rebellion in teens? The best thing to do is to talk about the changes youth are experiencing and what these changes mean. Through careful listening, adults can come to a better understanding of an adolescent's point-of-view, and respond in ways that youth can understand and appreciate.

Also, adults can help adolescents imagine the results, good and bad, of their behaviors. Keep in mind

that youth and adults may not see the results in the same way. For example, to an adult, a negative judgment by a friend may not seem like much, but to the teenager this may be a terrible thing.

- **Stay calm.** Don't be overly worried about teen conformity. Research shows that adolescents turn to their peers for opinions about **social matters**, but they turn to teachers and other adults when they want facts, and to parents for advice on **values, ethics, and future plans**.
- **Involve teens in decision-making.** It is very important that parents set firm and clear guidelines for youth. It is just as important that youth are given chances to be a **guiding force in their own lives**. They need chances to contribute in their families and communities. Let adolescents know they are respected by inviting them to take part in family and community projects. Ask their opinions and invite them to help with decision-making. Start with easy tasks and allow adolescents to work toward more involvement such as gathering information and helping to make major decisions.

Let teens make their own decisions on some things (within reason):

- Hair style
- Cleanliness and organization of their bedroom
- Clothing selection and purchasing
- After-school activities
- Bedtime

Other types of decisions are more important. Teens and adults should discuss them together, and adults should have the final say on things like:

- Curfew
- Dating
- After-school employment or volunteer work
- Driving privileges
- Spending money

Teens can also be involved with family decisions such as:

- Purchasing a family car
- Planning a family vacation
- Organizing a graduation celebration
- Planning family holidays
- Meal planning

How Can Adults Help Teens Develop Values?

Teens soon will be on their own and faced with many difficult choices. Teens learn best through practice. Give them chances to work through difficult decisions before they leave home, so that they can practice while you are still available as a safety net.

Tips to help teens develop values and morals:

- Be a warm and loving parent, but also be firm and fair, and use consistent rules. Explain your rules, and talk with youth about discipline.
- Give adolescents increasing responsibility for decision-making and leadership in school and in after-school activities. Follow through with their ideas.
- Give teens a voice in community decision-making, such as appointing teen members of coalitions and advisory groups. Let them know their help is valued respected.
- Look for chances to discuss politics, spirituality, and morals with adolescents.
- When listening to teens' opinions, encourage them to explain the reasons behind their opinions.
- Help youth learn about and participate in social and political events in the community, such as election activities, rallies, marches, and peaceful protests.
- Watch for opportunities to talk about consequences of behavior, both good and bad. Hold teens accountable when they make poor choices; allow them to experience the connection between behaviors and consequences.
- Remember to support adolescents and thank them for what they are doing.

The development of autonomy – in emotions, behaviors, and values – is a basic developmental challenge of the adolescent years. Understanding the changes adolescents are facing will allow you to help them become happy and productive adults.

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