

## **THE UNDERSTANDING OF ADOLESCENT AT RISK SITUATION**

Azizi Yahaya & Aida Mazan  
Faculty of Education  
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Adolescence is the developmental stage that spans the period from the period of childhood to the beginning of adulthood. A person does not go to sleep one night as a child and awaken as an adult the next morning, at least not in contemporary American society. But some cultures have designed elaborate ceremonies known as rites of passage or puberty rites, which publicly mark the passage from childhood to adulthood. At the end of the ceremony, the young person becomes an “instant adult” ready to assume adult responsibilities and to marry (Wood & Green Wood, 2002).

The concept of adolescence did not exist until psychologist G. Stanley Hall first wrote about it in his book by that name in 1904. Stanley Hall portrayed this stage in life as one of “storm and stress,” the inevitable result of biological changes occurring during the period. Anna Freud (1958), daughter of Sigmund Freud, even considered a stormy adolescence a necessary part of normal development. And though it does appear to be true that “storm and stress” are associated with adolescence more than with any other period of human development, Hall and Freud overstated their case (Arnett, 1999).

The adolescents engage in lots of high-risk behaviours, ranging from unprotected sex to reckless driving, is obvious. One widely accepted explanation for this fact is that young persons are characterized by what has been termed adolescent invulnerability – the belief that they are somehow immune from the potential harm of high-risk behaviours (Baron & Brown, 1991).

Several factors why adolescents are more likely to engage in risk behaviours may play a role. Perhaps adolescents find the rewards associated with such actions so pleasurable that they are not deterred even by the threat of serious potential harm. Alternatively, many adolescents may belong to groups whose social norms – rules about what is and is not

appropriate behaviour – favour high-risk actions. In short, they engage in such actions because their friends both expect and encourage them to do so (Baron, 1996).

Today's adolescents face a more dangerous and threatening world than did those of preceding generations. Children at highest risk for a troubled adolescence seem to be those who have a tendency toward depression or aggressive behaviour or who come from particularly negative environments, such as those filled with family conflict (Buchanan *et al.*, 1992). According to Ebata (1987), adolescent boys who experience turmoil are likely to have had difficulties before they reached adolescence, whereas girls are more likely to experience psychological difficulties for the first time in adolescence. Boys tend to use more direct, physically active coping strategies, while girls rely more on an interpersonal coping style (Recklitis & Noam, 1999).

At present, more than half of all marriages in the United States and many other countries end in divorce. This means that a large proportion of children and adolescents will spend at least part of their lives in a one-parent family – typically with their mothers (Norton & Moorman, 1987). Adolescents react to divorce with fear, anxiety, and feelings of insecurity about the future. Further, many blame one of the parents for the divorce: “What did she do to make Daddy leave?” “How can he desert us like this?” Some adolescents turn these feelings inward and experience considerable self-blame and guilt, sensing that they were responsible in some manner for the break up. In addition, adolescents described as academic underachievers – those whose academic performance is below what their intelligence would predict – are more likely to come from divorced than from two-parents homes (Baron, 1996).

Baron (1996) states that the effects of divorce on adolescents' emotional well-being depend on many different factors including the quality of the care they received before the divorce and the nature of the divorce, whether amicable or filled with anger and resentment. Needless to say, the more negative the feelings of the parents toward one another, the more likely the emotional harm to the adolescent.

Adolescents living in parent-absent families face another set of problems. A growing percentage of children are being born to unmarried mothers, and many of these youngsters never ever know their fathers. Research findings suggest that the risks associated with growing up in a parent-absent (typically father-absent) family include increased risk for delinquent behaviours, reduced school performance, and difficulties in forming meaningful relationship – including stable romantic ones – with members of the opposite sex (Eberhardt & Schill, 1984).

During the 1950s, television shows in the United States painted a glowing picture of family life. A caring, loving mother, a kind and wise father, considerate siblings – this was the image portrayed on the screen. Even a teenager, knew that there was a sizable gap between these images and reality. For many of today's adolescents, however, it's not so much a gap as a chasm. Many teenagers find themselves in what are currently termed dysfunctional families – families that do not meet children's need and in fact may do them serious harm (Amato, 1990: McKenry *et al.*, 1991). Some dysfunctional families are neglectful or even engage in maltreatment of children. For example, consider what life is like for adolescents growing up in homes where one or both parents abuse alcohol or other drugs. Such youngsters can only guess what normal behaviour is like, since they see very little of it at home (Baron, 1996).

Perhaps an even more disturbing form of maltreatment involves sexual abuse – sexual contact activities forced on children or adolescents. Unfortunately, sexual abuse is far from rare (Kendall-Tackett *et al.*, 1993): indeed, large numbers of children become the victims of such betrayal by adults every year. Sexual abuse often occurs during early childhood, but it is also an alarmingly common experience for adolescents. That is produces serious psychological harm is obvious. Symptoms common among adolescents victims of sexual abuse are depression, withdrawal, running away, substance abuse, and somatic (bodily) complaints (Morrow & Sorrell, 1989). The likelihood and magnitude of these harmful effects increase with the frequency and duration of such abuse; when the perpetrator is a close family member such as father, mother, or siblings; and when overt force is involved (Kendall-Tackett *et al.*, 1993)

In sum, it is clear that because of changing social conditions, large numbers of adolescents are at considerable risk for psychological or even physical harm. Despite the adverse conditions under which they grow up, however, many of these youngsters avoid potential harm and go on to lead healthy, rewarding lives (Baron, 1996).