News - Childhood

Teenagers and the Struggle For Identity

By Seth Mullins

“Who am I?” is a question oft-repeated by teenagers, though they may not voice it out loud or use precisely those words. One of the biggest challenges that they face during the transition between childhood and adulthood is this struggle with their own sense of identity. For one thing, it seems to constantly shift: they may act one way with a particular group of peers and completely different with another. There is a sense of being “neither here nor there”, also. They are so often in a state of becoming that it can be difficult, at any one time, to pinpoint exactly where they are.

Part of the confusion is caused by hormonal changes, which are occurring so rapidly at this stage in their lives. Their appearance is undergoing a radical transformation; their bodies not only look but also feel different. They’re suddenly confronted with issues that they’d given little thought to before: body odor, oily hair and acne, having their periods, needing to shave. The way that they see themselves in the mirror has a big impact upon their self-image. It’s human nature to want to identify who we are with the way our bodies are, and when changes are happening so quickly it can be hard to form a clear picture.

Parents often wonder why even previously obedient kids will suddenly start questioning everything that they’re told once they reach their teen years. Though it looks like nothing more than rebellion (and that may be part of it), what kids are really doing is exploring their own independence and preparing for the life of responsibility that lies ahead of them. If growing up means that they have to learn to think for themselves and make their own choices, then they can’t take other people’s word for anything – even if those people are their parents.

Ironically, though, the opinions of their friends and acquaintances become very important at this age even as kids are rejecting their parents’ overtures. Here is another area where their sense of identity can become clouded, because they start comparing themselves to everyone else. They may worry about why they’re developing earlier or later than their peers in certain areas. Because puberty and adolescence are such confusing transitions, kids can feel a strong urge to check their own progress alongside that of another, or to gravitate to people who, for all outward appearances, seem to have it all figured out. No wonder they end up questioning who they really are, after having spent so much time imitating others.

The ways in which teenagers are apt to lose themselves, however, probably help them to really find themselves in the end. A certain amount of experimentation – with rebellion, imitation, and changes of image and attitude – is probably necessary before they can form a real sense of what they want and how to go about getting it. Parents who recognize this come to understand that they have to let go of their children, to a certain extent, just when they most want to protect them the most. They can’t choose their kids’ identities; kids have to discover it for themselves.

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