

Chapter 1

Introduction to Adolescence in India: Issues, Challenges, and Possibilities



Swati Patra

Abstract The term ‘adolescence’ generates varied emotions, perception, and cognition within us. The fluidity of the adolescence phase of life highlights the role of socio-political-economic-cultural determinants influencing the developmental trajectories of adolescents. This affects significantly their development, health, and well-being. Given the huge demographic dividend of adolescents and young people in India and across the world, the key is to harness this potential resource to contribute actively towards their own development and progress as well as that of the society and nation. This requires that we not only discuss the issues, concerns, and challenges of adolescents but also the ways and possibilities for them to fulfil their potential, perform optimally, and thrive.

‘Adolescence’!

What does the term mean? What image do we have of an adolescent? Do we have different emotions, perception, and cognition related to the term adolescent? Most probably, one would think of an adolescent as someone who is not a child anymore, has grown up, but is not yet an adult. So, adolescence is the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, moving towards relative independence from parents and family. However, the experience during this phase is not uniform across cultures and contexts. Adolescents are not a homogenous group. The period of adolescence thus does not indicate a fixed time frame, rather it marks a phase of development which is characterized by dramatic physical changes and huge psychological changes. There are changes in cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of development, which further impact their interpersonal interaction and own personal achievement and excellence in life. Hence, adolescents need to be considered as a diverse group whose developmental trajectories are influenced by various demographic factors such as

S. Patra (✉)

Faculty of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi, India

e-mail: swatipatra@ignou.ac.in

gender, socio-economic status, caste, race, disability, deprivation, and other situational factors. It is pertinent to keep this diversity in mind, the at-risk group as well as all adolescents while studying, designing, and developing programmes for their development and well-being.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescents as those between 10 and 19 years of age. It describes the young people as between 10 and 24 years of age group which includes the youth from 15 to 24 years of age. The National Youth Policy (http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Youth_in_India-2017.pdf) (2014) of the Government of India has defined youth as persons in the age group of 15–29 years. Thus, there are variations in the age range which highlights the fluidity of this stage and the role of socio-economic–cultural determinants influencing their development.

According to UNICEF (<https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/adolescent-development-participation>), every fifth person in India is between 10 and 19 years, and India has the largest adolescent population (253 million) in the world. Further, around 21% of the Indian population is adolescents (Strategy Handbook, 2014). The Government of India has launched the National Adolescent Health Strategy (Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram) in 2014 to address the challenges faced by this age group so that they can achieve the true potential of which they are capable.

What are the *crucial gamechangers* to turn this huge demographic dividend of the young people from just beneficiaries of different programmes and policies to active participants in the process of development, both their own and that of the nations? ***How can we make adolescents thrive?***

If we look at the historical development of the field of adolescence, it reflects a change in the theoretical perspectives used to understand adolescence and address their issues. The field of adolescence initially has been conceptualized as a stage of storm and stress by Hall (1904). It was viewed that adolescents in this transitional phase face various issues and challenges as they progress to adulthood. Freud's psychoanalytic approach emphasized the psychosexual stages of development and the early childhood experiences in influencing the adult personality and development (Ciccarelli & White, 2018a). However, neo-Freudians differed from Freud, and later on Erik Erikson proposed the psychosocial theory of development emphasizing a life span approach to development rather than early influences only (Erikson, 1959). The role of contextual factors and society were recognized as important factors for the development of adolescents. Erikson pointed out that a sense of competition develops among adolescents if they successfully master the developmental tasks of the particular stage, helping them to establish their role and identity in society.

Humanistic–Existential theories further emphasized the innate goodness and ability of each human being to grow and achieve (Rogers, 1961). It focused on positive traits in the individual and advocated individuals as capable of self-direction. The key words—choice, freedom, and growth—characterize adolescents which we need to recognize and accept in the context of their diverse backgrounds. This will help focus on the inherent capacities they have and unfold these to function effectively and excel.

Adolescents, however, do not function in a vacuum. There is a dynamic interaction with the context in which they live and operate. Bronfenbrenner has highlighted the systems approach affecting the development of the child in his ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). He emphasizes an interaction of the growing child with the immediate environment which includes family, peer, and neighbour; intermediate environment of school, community; and the distal environment of the political, social–historical circumstances, cultural values, and laws. Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory also talks about the influence of socio-cultural environment on the learning and cognitive development of children (Vygotsky, 1978). It puts focus on encouraging children through the use of principles of scaffolding and zone of proximal development.

Adolescence is thus considered as a socio-cultural phenomenon characterized by cross-cultural variations in how it is interpreted and experienced (Ciccharelli & White, 2018b). This affects their development, health, and well-being. Amartya Sen in his capability approach highlights the importance of capabilities in the well-being of individuals. According to him, these capabilities enable individuals to do and to be that which they have reasons to value (Sen, 1992). Amartya Sen has based his capability approach on Nussbaum’s (2003) conceptualization of well-being which talks about different capabilities across ten different domains (having good health, freedom of emotional expression, being able to laugh and play, having self-respect, contributing to community, etc. (Sen, 1997)).

To be, what human beings are able to be and do, is being true to oneself as underscored by humanistic theories. This also highlights the positive psychology perspective which builds on the humanistic theories. It helps the individual to thrive and maintain harmony with oneself and the environment around.

Positive psychology emerged in response to the exclusive focus of psychology on psychological problems and disorders faced by human beings after World War II (Snyder et al., 2011). Although this has helped a lot in our increasing understanding of the field of psychopathology, clinical manifestations, prevalence, diagnosis, etiology, treatment, and therapeutic intervention for mental disorders and other mental health conditions, it has neglected the other equally important aspect of human personality—the strengths, resilience, and optimal functioning of the individual.

The field of psychology initially had three missions—curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent (Snyder et al., 2011). However, the latter two missions were not pursued as vehemently as the first one. Positive psychology started as a field in psychology to address this imbalance when Martin Seligman declared it as the theme of the American Psychological Association in 1998 when he was elected as its president.

Broadly, positive psychology focuses on positive subjective experiences, positive traits, and positive institutions. Thus, it highlights the role of building up character strengths in the individual and also the influencing role of institutions such as family, school, and community in achieving optimal human functioning. A recent study on the relationship between adolescents’ perception of their strengths, weaknesses, and wishes and their mental health indicates the need to focus more on building the strengths of adolescents (Devi & Patra, 2019). The study reported a majority of

students had a moderate level of mental health (61%), whereas 11% were languishing and only 28% were at the flourishing level of mental health. *Adolescents need to move beyond the average level of mental health towards flourishing and thriving.*

Various intervention programmes and youth development programmes utilize the principles of positive psychology to enable young people to build up strengths and resilience to achieve optimally and function effectively. One study suggests eight features related to adolescents' daily settings and experiences which can be used in community programmes to promote positive youth development (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). These include physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure, e.g., clear and consistent rules and boundaries; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong, i.e., inclusion and engagement; positive social norms including rules of behaviour and values; support for efficacy and mattering (such as youth-based empowerment practices, focus on improvement, and being taken seriously); opportunities for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

In the light of the above discussion, *the present book has adopted a positive psychology perspective to discuss the adolescence stage.* This book offers a unique perspective on the adolescence stage by discussing issues, concerns, and challenges of adolescents during this stage as well as ways for them to perform optimally and thrive. So, the major focus of the book is to highlight the challenges and provide ways to help adolescents thrive. However, this requires the readers a general and critical understanding of adolescent development.

Hence, the first three chapters describe the stage of adolescence in terms of the developmental aspects, their identity development, and peer relations. This provides the backdrop in which the issues of adolescents are discussed in later chapters. These issues and challenges range from immediate academic concerns and career-related concerns to effects of aggression, violence, and trauma on adolescent development. The book also includes a chapter on substance use among adolescents, which is an important concern across gender, type of family, rural–urban location, socio-economic status, and communities in which adolescents live. Further chapters focus on depression, suicide among adolescents, and also various mental disorders that affect this age group. Disability is another significant concern in adolescents, which has been focused on in the book. Moreover, the current trend of the use of technology in almost every sphere of life has impacted adolescents in a big way. Living in a digital world has its own benefits and challenges. Adolescents need to navigate the digital world in an effective way to take care of their mental health and well-being.

The book finally throws light on various preventive and intervention approaches to lead the adolescents to thrive. It focuses on individual character strengths such as building gratitude and resilience, and life skills among adolescents. Further, it focuses on the context or setting in which adolescents function such as peer group, family, and community. The socio-cultural context definitely needs to be considered when talking about adolescent well-being.

Thus, the book takes a comprehensive approach in discussing the issues, dealing with these issues, and helping adolescents to fulfil their potentials, thrive, and achieve optimal functioning in interaction with their context. It focuses on measures to

improve adolescent well-being at the individual level as well as at the family and the community context, which will help formulate appropriate plans, programmes, and policies to develop adolescents and the young people of our country as real assets.

References

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Ciccharelli, S. K., & White, J. N. (2018b). *Psychology*. (p. 342), Adapted by Girishwar Misra. Pearson.
- Ciccharelli, S. K., & White, J. N. (2018a). *Psychology*. (p. 510), Adapted by Girishwar Misra. Pearson.
- Devi, S. & Patra, S. (2019). *Exploring mental health of adolescents in relation to their strengths, weaknesses and wishes*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Erikson, E. H. (1959). Growth and crises of the healthy personality. *Psychological Issues, 1*, 50–100.
- Hall, G. S. (1904). *Adolescence: Its psychology and its relation to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion and education* (Vol. 1 and 2). Prentice-Hall.
- http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Youth_in_India-2017.pdf
- <https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/adolescent-development-participation>
- National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2002). Community programs to promote youth development. The National Academics Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/10022>. <https://www.nap.edu/read/10022/chapter/6>
- Nussbam, M. C. (2003). Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice. *Feminist Economics, 9*, 33–59.
- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality reexamined*. Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (1997). From income inequality to economic inequality. *Southern Economic Journal, 64*(2), 384–401.
- Snyder, C. R., Lopez, S. J., & Pedrotti, J. T. (2011). *Positive psychology: The scientific and practical explorations of human strengths* (2nd ed, p. 4). Sage South Asia edition.
- Strategy Handbook. (2014). Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram. Adolescent Health Division, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare Government of India. January 2014.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.