

# UNDERSTANDING YOUTH

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**W**e have all been teenagers and know what it's like. Texts and readings, theories, empirical studies on adolescence... nothing can ever recreate it for us.

What we need is far more than a grasp of theory and a facility with psychological terms. We need a sympathy that grows from deep within, from seeing beneath behaviour and words to understand, accept, and care about persons who are emerging from childhood into adulthood.

David L. Lehman, summarising sixty years of study by European and American psychologists, suggests that "the fundamental task of adolescence is 'ego identity' or 'self-definition'." This does not mean that adolescents have no sense of "self." Various writers express their understanding of adolescents in different ways, which together sketch a picture to help us see how this process feels to those going through it.

Friedenberg calls the process self-definition. "Adolescence is the period during which a young person learns who he is, and what he really feels. It is the time during which he differentiates himself from his culture, though on the culture's terms. It is the age at which, by becoming a person in his own right, he becomes capable of deeply felt relationships to other individuals perceived clearly as such." Douvan and Adelson

express the same understanding in these words: "Identity does not begin in adolescence. The child has been formulating and reformulating identities throughout his life ... At adolescence, however, the commitment to an identity becomes critical. During this period, the youngster must synthesise earlier identifications with personal qualities and relate them to social opportunities and the social ideals. Who the child is to be will be influenced (and in some cases determined) by what the environment permits and encourages."

Thus identity-building is not unique to youth, but is of lifelong importance. Adolescence does not "mark the birth of a 'new self', but it is true that the achievement of self-identity is not fully realized until the conflicts and problems of the adolescent period have been lived through."

Many questions are directly related to the emerging self. What are my limits and abilities academically? Can I see myself as more advanced than others? Or a failure? Who am I in my relationships with others? Popular? A leader?

Recognized as valuable and worthwhile? Am I ready now to take responsibility for myself? Or do Mom and Dad still see me as a child? Why do I feel so uncertain, so moody? Am I really an unstable person? Can I make up my own mind? Make my own way?

Young people emerging into adult-

hood have to ask these questions, and give at least tentative answers, during adolescence.

However this process is viewed, it is clear that this time is one of extreme importance to young persons, and to Christian education. For if the years of youth truly are years of transition, of forming the person and personality, then these are crucial years for introducing youth to the fullness of life in Christ - crucial years to help teens discover who they are, and can become, in Him.

Those ministering with youth need to understand what is happening in the fellows and girls they serve, not only in order to sympathise with them and feel with them as they know pressures we only dimly remember, but also to recognise the role Christian ministry can have in guiding youth to define themselves as Christ's persons, to help them crystallise, as their own, values and attitudes and personalities that bear His distinctive stamp.

## THAT GUY IN THE MIRROR

It's striking how much impact a youth's physical characteristics and appearance have on his self-image. In fact, the first adolescent feelings for the self are probably rooted here. One writer notes that "it would appear from autobiographical material (submitted by