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Adolescent Counseling

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Foreword
Paul Swamidhas Sudhakar Russell

2nd Edition



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Contents

SECTION 1 Understanding Adolescent Behavior

1. Introduction 3

MKC Nair, Harikumar SK

- Factors that Lead to Cognitive Dissonance in Adolescents *3*
- Need for Adolescent Counseling *5*
- Basis of Counseling *6*
- Development of Self-identity *7*
- Psychological Development *8*
- Cognitive Factors *9*
- Definition of Counseling *11*
- Goals of Counseling *12*
- Qualities of a Counselor *12*
- Types of Counseling *13*
- Approaches to Counseling *13*

2. Developmental Theories 18

Sonny Jose

- Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development *19*
- Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development *21*
- Freud's Stages of Psychosexual Development *24*
- Freud's Structural and Topographical Models of Personality *26*
- Topographical Model *27*
- Ego Defense Mechanisms *28*
- Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development *30*
- The *Ashramas* *33*
- Other Developmental Theories *34*

3. Adolescent Parenting 37

Rekha RS, MKC Nair

- Parenting Issues *37*
- Skills Needed in Adolescence *40*
- Danger Signals in Adolescents *40*
- Adolescent Parenting: Tips *42*

4. Adolescent Sexuality 46
MKC Nair, Resmi VR
- Evolving Healthy Sexuality *46*
- Sexuality Problems in Adolescence *47*
- Sexual Relationships *50*
- Sex and Sexuality Sessions *50*
- Myths And Misconceptions *51*
- Sexuality: The Sum Total *52*

5. Adolescent Behavior Problems 54
Anil Kumar TV, Indu PS
- Aggressive Child *55*
- Depressed Child *55*
- Functional Child *56*
- Child In Distress *57*
- Inattentive Child *57*
- Grandiose Rebellious Child *57*
- Anxious Child *58*
- Child with Odd Thinking and Odd Behavior *58*

6. Ten Good Reasons for Adolescent Counseling 61
MKC Nair, Paul Swamidhas Sudhakar Russell
- Adolescent Problems do have Antecedents *61*
- Developmental Problems are not Uncommon *62*
- There is a Huge Demand for Adolescent Counseling Services *64*
- School Counseling Needs have Changed Over the Years *65*
- "The Spark From Within" Needs to be Ignited in the Adolescent *65*
- Anxiety and Stress have a High Toll on Physical and Mental Well-Being *66*
- Violence among Young People (10–24 Years) is on the Rise *67*
- Mood Disorders are Increasingly being Recognized *67*
- Mental Health Disorders Have Onset in Adolescence *69*
- Drug Therapy and Psychotherapy are a Must for Mental Health Illnesses *69*

SECTION 2 Fundamentals of Counseling

7. Tips for History Taking and Mental State Examination 75
Vidhu Kumar, Preeti M Galagali
- Basic Aspects of Interview *75*
- Scheme of History Taking *75*
- Scheme of Examination *77*
- Scheme of Diagnosis *77*
- HEEADSSS Psychosocial History *78*

8. Counseling Skills and Techniques 86
Sonny Jose
- Relating–Understanding–Changing Framework in Counseling *86*
- Attending and Listening Skills *88*
- Responding Skills *91*
- Cathartic Skills (Skills to Help with Feelings) *97*
- Decision-making Skills *100*
- Planning Skills *102*
- Closure Skills *103*

9. Effective Counseling Model 106
Rev TJ Thomas
- Prehelping Phase—Attending *106*
- Prehelping Phase—Expressing *107*
- Postcounseling Phase (Celebration) *111*

10. Legal and Ethical Issues 113
Raghavendra Kumar K
- Key Definitions/Concepts *113*
- Boundaries *115*
- Autonomy *117*
- Confidentiality *117*
- Potentially Harmful Behaviors *118*
- Meeting Clients at Public Places *118*
- Responsibilities as a Counselor Toward Parents/ Legal Guardians *118*

11. Behavior Modification Techniques.....121
Indira MS, MKC Nair
- Happiness *121*
- Behavior Model *122*
- Behavior Counseling *122*
- Behavior Therapy *124*
- Behavior Modification *124*

12. Dialectical Behavior Therapy Principles in Counseling.....132
Vinayak Koparde
- Theoretical Foundation of Dialectical Behavior Therapy *132*
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy as a Multimodal Therapy *133*

13. Cognitive Behavior Therapy Principles in Counseling 140
Swati Ghate, Shubhada Khirwardkar
- Principle of Collaborative Empiricism *140*
- Principle of Here and Now *141*
- Cognitive Principles *142*
- Behavioral Principles *146*
- Principle of a Structured Approach *146*

14. Strengths-based Counseling 148
Sreyoshi Ghosh
- Evolution of the Concept *148*
- Rationale for a Strengths-based Approach *148*
- Major Theoretical Frameworks of Counseling that Incorporate a Strengths-based Approach *149*
- Looking at Clinical Assessment Through a Strength-based Lens *150*

15. Motivational Interviewing 152
Shubhada Khirwadkar, Swati Ghate
- Theoretical Background *152*
- Spirit of Motivational Interviewing *153*
- Core Principles of Motivational Interviewing *154*
- Skills of Motivational Interviewing *155*
- Steps in the Process of Motivational Interviewing *157*
- Strengths of Motivational Interviewing *159*
- Limitations of Motivational Interviewing *160*

16. Counseling for Healthy Media Use 163
Shweta Sunil, Manoj Kumar Sharma, Narendra Nath Samantaray
- Core Conditions of Counseling Relationships *164*
- Skills of Counselor *166*

17. Trauma-informed Care 169
Sukanya Ray
- Trauma-informed Approach *171*
- Stabilization *174*

18. Scholastic Counseling 176
Mini K Paul, Mercy Sebastian
- Left Brain Functions *176*
- Right Brain Functions *176*
- Improving Memory *177*
- Scholastic Backwardness *178*

19. Guidance and Counseling in School Setting 184
Mini K Paul, Suresh Kumar G
- Principles of Guidance *184*
- Need for Guidance Services *184*
- Role of Guidance Worker *185*
- Vocational Development *196*
- Vocational/Career Guidance *196*
- Vocational Guidance Programs in Schools *199*

20. Life Skills Education 201
Anuradha HS
- What are Life Skills? *201*
- Importance of Life Skills in Adolescence *202*
- Life Skills in Group Format *205*
- Life Skills Education in School *206*

21. Depressive Disorders Among Adolescents.....208
Anil Kumar TV, MKC Nair
- Understanding Depression—Beck's Cognitive Theory *209*
- Depression in Adolescence *210*
- Depression in Preadolescence *211*
- Predisposing Factors *211*
- Assessment *211*
- Drug Management *212*

- Course and Outcome of Depression *214*
- When to Refer to a Psychiatrist *215*
- Individual/Group Counseling *215*

22. Perspectives in Family Counseling.....219
Fr MK George SJ, Susha Janardanan
- Crisis In Families *219*
- Family Counseling *220*

23. Premarital and Newly Wed Counseling.....228
MKC Nair, Leena Sumaraj
- Marital Disharmony *228*
- Conflicts in Marriage *231*
- Premarital Counseling—Tips *233*

24. Counseling in the Child Rights Perspective.....241
Babu George, MKC Nair
- Gender Perspective *242*
- Sexuality Issues *243*
- Protecting the Earth for Children *243*
- Reaching the Unreached *244*
- Child Abuse and Family Violence *245*

25. Self-counseling 247
MKC Nair, Shamal Kumar, Deepa Binod
- Burden of Anxiety Disorders and Depressive Disorders in India *248*
- Noorul Islam Institute of Medical Science–Child Development Research Centre–Self Counseling Questionnaire *249*
- Simple Self-counseling Methods *250*
- Self-counseling for Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder *254*
- Annexure *255*

SECTION 3 Case Discussions

26. Grief Counseling 263
Neema Sitapara
- Phases and Psychological Reactions to Loss *263*
- Atypical Grief in Children and Indications for Therapy or Referral *267*

- Role of Grief Counselor *267*
- Case Vignette *268*

27. Anxiety 271

Shubhada Khirwadkar

- Case Vignette *271*
- Session 1 *274*
- Session 2 *276*
- Session 3 *262*
- Sessions 4–6 *277*
- Session 7 *277*
- Session 8 *277*
- Session 9 *278*
- Session 10 *278*
- Sessions on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Life Skills *278*
- Termination *279*

28. Romantic Relationship 280

Newton Luiz

- Case Vignette *280*
- Initial Assessment *281*
- Steps of Counseling *284*
- Follow-up Sessions *284*
- Termination *285*
- Parental Counseling *285*

29. Problematic Screen Use 287

Neha John, Manoj Kumar Sharma, Nitin Anand, Rajesh Kumar

- Case Vignette *288*
- Steps of Counseling *288*
- Referral Indications and Collaborations with Multidisciplinary Health Professionals *290*

30. Eating Disorders 292

Chitra Dinakar, Preeti M Galagali

- Case Vignette *292*
- Initial Impression *293*
- Case Discussion *293*
- Steps of Counseling *293*

31. Suicidal Behavior 298
Preeti M Galagali, Chitra Dinakar
- Case Vignette *298*
- Steps of Counseling *298*

32. Strength-based Counseling: Practical Application 303
Sreyoshi Ghosh
- Case Vignette *303*
- Follow-up *305*

Index 307

3 CHAPTER

Adolescent Parenting

Rekha RS, MKC Nair

INTRODUCTION

A person with a poetic disposition would describe adolescence as the most fascinating period of life, full of fun and frolic. But parents who have an adolescent child would probably define it as the most stressful period of parenting life cycle, wherein:

- At one moment, parents feel that children have grown up, and at the next, they realize that they are worse than small kids.
- The period when the adolescents prefer the company of friends or the privacy of their room to spending time with parents
- Complaints of parents intruding in personal matters are common, compounded with the habit of doing things just the opposite of what their parents had wanted.
- Start hanging out late, in spite of parents' advice and threats, either spend too much time in front of the mirror or are extremely careless about dressing, brood over silly matters like pimples and figure, which are of no concern to parents
- Start experimenting with their first smoke and skip meals as they are extremely figure conscious but at the same time have the bad habit of eating out often
- Lot of infatuations, broken hearts are not rare, and they also show emotional liability on the slightest provocation.
- Find it difficult to handle the rapid physiological and associated physical and mental changes
- The children's secretiveness and rebelliousness make it more difficult for them to confide in their parents even if they are good confidantes.

PARENTING ISSUES

Parents are not sure how to tackle their adolescents, and parental efforts to make life with teenagers easy are not always met with

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success. But that does not mean that the crux of the problem lies with the adolescents themselves. At times, problems occur when parents are unable to grow up with their adolescents. Hence, to make the task for parenting adolescents easier, parents need to understand the peculiarities of this stage and should think of what can be done, what should be done, and what should not be done while their children pass through this challenging period of life.

More Physical Comforts and Loss of Attention

In the olden days, when there were too many children in the family and only limited resources, parents struggled hard to meet the basic needs of children. Hence, yesteryear's children had a goal in life, whether it was good education, a well-paid job, or a decent living, which always kept them going. Nowadays, parents, probably in an effort to give all comforts and luxury that they had been denied in their childhood, are providing more than what is possible for their children and at the same time are brushing aside their children's craving for affection and attention. This can create an increasing feeling of emptiness in children when they have no goals in life and it can also lead to severe interpersonal problems, especially in marriage, as they are unknowingly imbibing the idea that caring is just providing physical comforts and luxuries. Hence, children should not be provided with more than what is needed and, instead, parents should spend more time with them and show their affection through gestures like remembering the children's good deeds, discussing personal problems and family issues, and participating in the parent–teacher meetings.

Role Confusion

For parents, children always remain children and they sometimes tend to treat adolescents as kids. This aggravates the role confusion or dilemma in adolescents as they are treated like adults at one moment and like children at the next. When adolescents take up new roles, it is not uncommon that they err. Instead of finding fault with them, parents should train them to realize where they have gone wrong and to take mistakes in their stride, rather than feeling too much guilty about it.

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Low Stress Tolerance

Parents are always there, behind children, telling them what to do and what not to do and if possible doing things which they themselves can manage, whereby they see only the end product and are not aware of the obstacles in achieving the goals, the alternatives available, and how to get things done with patience, perseverance, and endurance. If placed in a difficult situation, these children fall easy prey to it and succumb without even considering the available options. The increase in suicidal rates and depression among teenagers throws light on their very low stress tolerance. Hence, parents should make it a point not to do things for children which they themselves can manage; instead, they should assign small responsibilities to their children and guide them when necessary; this will instill trust and confidence in themselves, so that in future they can safely tide over the times of crisis.

Lack of Access to Information on Healthy Sexuality

It is during this period that they develop interest in the opposite sex. But for parents, it is difficult to come to terms with the fact that their child is grown up enough to have a liking for the opposite sex. Similarly, masturbation is also not uncommon among adolescents, especially boys. Problems due to misconceptions about sex are higher as they lack access to right information on sex and sexuality. Most of the parents, teachers, and elders do not know how to explain sexuality in simple, nonembarrassing words. Parents themselves are shy and secretive about sex. The only available information is from lay magazines online pornography, social media and wrong information passed on by peers, which helps in giving only a distorted idea about sex and sexuality, thereby causing fear, embarrassment, and guilt in adolescents. Parents are aware of the dangers associated with these unscientific sources of sex education, but they do not know how to provide the same.

Period of Value Conflict

Adolescence is a period of value conflict. Adolescents do not know what is right and what is wrong. Hence, during this period, if adolescents do not have a strong value base and willpower, the

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chances of succumbing to peer pressure and thereby engaging in undesirable acts like smoking, alcoholism, drug addiction, and premarital sex are immense. Hence, parents should try to develop self-love in their children. Self-love does not mean being selfish. If a person loves himself, he will be able to avoid doing things that will prove harmful to him and only such a person can really care for others.

SKILLS NEEDED IN ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is a period of experimenting, experiencing, and expanding. What parents should do is understand their adolescents, and safeguard, protect, and guide them safely through this period. Adolescents need help and guidance in the following aspects:

- *Decision making:* Remember, to be or not to be is a problem of not just adolescents alone but of adults also.
- *Problem solving:* Here parents have to be extra careful in offering help in solving the problems of adolescents because, although they need help, they are ashamed of acknowledging the fact that they require assistance whereby the chances of aggravating the problem are high.
- *Effective communication:* As adolescents want to be close to their parents and at the same time away from them, they may be rebellious. Here parents should always see to it that they keep the line of communication with their adolescents open.
- *Other skills:* Developing skills in enhancing interpersonal relationship, self-awareness, empathy, coping with stress, and managing emotions are important for adolescents.

All youth need support and guidance. But some young people whose adolescence is marked by more serious struggles may require help from outside the family. Many people believe that family matters should be kept private. Seeking help, however, simply means that the caregiver is drawing on every community resource that can be used to support your child. It is never too late to reach out for help.

DANGER SIGNALS IN ADOLESCENTS

- Large amounts of time spent alone and in isolation from family and friends

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- Sudden changes in school performance
- Drastic mood swings or changes in behavior
- Changes in your child's peer group or separation from long-time friends
- Lack of interest in hobbies or social and recreational activities

Keep in mind that these signs do not always mean that the adolescent is in trouble. Some changes in friendships, for example, are normal as young people mature and find new interests. Changes in the family situation, temperamental differences, and sudden crises can trigger off problem behaviors which may be complicated by the normative adolescent behavior of not wanting to share feelings and experiences.

The first step for parents in dealing with concerns about their adolescents, therefore, is to improve or reopen the lines of communication. If problems appear to persist and the child seems reluctant or unable to discuss them, the parent can try talking with him/her in a nonconfrontational manner about the changes noticed. Parents can express their concern for the child's well-being and show interest in helping in any way possible. But they should be prepared for defensive reactions. They should be willing to help their adolescent child and talk through problems, rather than immediately giving solutions.

Parents will be troubled by the confrontational nature of some of the adolescent behavior. It is not an easy job to decide where you should draw the limits and where you should give in. Hence, there is no tailor-made solutions to these problems. Each of us develops our own strategies in dealing with our adolescents at times through trial and error, through experience and at times adopting the practices which our parents had followed with us. But certain strategies that would certainly help in the understanding and handling of adolescents are as follows:

- Parents should try to be good role models.
- Try to keep the communication alive, especially between mothers and daughters, and thereby create a feeling that I am here for you.
- Parents should take efforts to understand adolescent development. Learn about the behaviors to expect, the effects of

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physical changes, and the ways to help the teenager to deal with change.
- Help to choose good friends before friendship is established.
- Provide right information on sex and sexuality, without creating anxiety in them.
- Encourage developing sharing, good habits, and autonomy, and instill in them a good value system.
- Give them freedom but within limits.
- Avoid unhealthy comparisons and cursing adolescents.
- Be authoritative and not authoritarian (autocrat).
- Instill confidence and trust in adolescents.
- Help to keep body and mind clean and healthy through yoga, social service, National Service Scheme (NSS), and spiritual activities. This helps not only to channelize extra energy but also to develop confidence.

ADOLESCENT PARENTING: TIPS

- Educate yourself about adolescent development. Learn about the behaviors to be expected, the effects of physical changes, and the ways to help your child deal with change.
- Remember your own adolescence. Remember your own changing feelings, anger at authority, fears, and hopes. Look at your adolescent's behavior in the context of those memories to help you keep perspective.
- Parenting is a learned skill. Training can help even experienced parents by giving them new tools for supporting children through adolescence. Talking to other parents about their own experiences in handling adolescent children can be very helpful.
- Listen more than talking. Young people have spent at least a decade as listeners in most situations. During adolescence, they want to and need the chance to share their feelings and ideas and to begin recasting family beliefs, stories, and traditions in the light of their changing identity.
- Teach adolescents about the joys and the troubles in life and ways to revel in the good times and cope with the bad. The myth that life is always easy or fair or that one should always be happy can lead to frustration for young people facing the realities of life.

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- Use positive reinforcement for positive behavior whenever possible; it is far more effective than criticism or punishment for negative behavior. Words that belittle can hurt an adolescent's self-esteem. The most useful tools in raising young people are sensitivity, praise, understanding, and communication.
- Teach adolescents that rights and responsibilities go hand in hand and give the child increasing responsibility for his/her personal well-being and that of the family. Provide the child opportunities to help around the house and to become involved in decision-making discussions in the family. In doing so, seeking the child's input enables him/her to understand the processes that can be used in making those decisions.
- Look for situations that can allow a child to test decision-making skills with the support of caring adults. Supportive adults can help provide the child with an understanding of the impact of those decisions on both the child and the others. They also can assist the adolescent in coping with the results of these choices.
- Helping an adolescent to move toward independence is a key thing. For every youth, the need to assert independence will happen at different times and through different means. Becoming attuned to children's attempts to operate independently will help in supporting those efforts and providing guidance when early attempts at decision-result in less-than-desired outcomes. It is sometimes difficult for parents to give up control out of concern for their child's safety. Adolescents' skills in coping with increasing responsibility will be enhanced by parents' willingness to support them as they make choices and face new challenges.
- Offer the child chances to become involved in the community. All young people are searching for their place in the world. Involving adolescents in developing solutions to community problems can shift their focus from themselves and help them to develop skills and feel involved and empowered.
- Spend quality and quantity time with adolescents. Adolescence is a time when young people naturally begin to pull away from the family and spend more time at school, with friends, or at a job. Still, the time spent with caring parents is key to young people's

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ability to grow emotionally and socially. Take advantage of times that the adolescent is home, over dinner or watching a cricket match, to continue building your relationship.

- Getting involved in the child's outdoor interests can be useful. A sincere attempt at involvement will both convince the child of your support and help the parents to remain informed about the child's interests.
- Treating your adolescent child's friends with respect and care is a must for him/her to accept you as a responsible parent and not just an adult tyrant.
- Parents have to accept that the adolescents too have feelings. Parents may feel frustrated, angry, discouraged, or sad during difficult times with their adolescent. Being a good parent does not mean being perfect. Modeling the ability to apologize when parents have an inappropriate showdown with their children or others will set an example and help the child to understand the human frailty. It will also teach them ways to mend relationships strained by stress or disagreement.
- Seeking support and guidance for the parent in dealing with the changes in a child moving through adolescence may also be needed. Learn about the signs of crisis and talk with other parents or professionals. By doing so, the parent can begin to tell the difference between adolescent behavior that indicates a youth in crisis and the usual behavior associated with a life passage.
- Remember that most youth have problems at some time or other. Acting-out behavior can be a normal part of becoming an adult. Parents sometimes needlessly feel embarrassed when their children are having trouble. A parent need not assume that the child's behavior always reflects on the quality of his/her parenting.
- Do not always push for drastic or dramatic solutions. Sometimes, young people just need time and support to work through their problems.
- Parents should never attempt to foist their unrealized academic and career dreams on their offspring. This becomes all the more unrealistic and potentially risky when the youngster has little interest or aptitude for the parental choices.

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- Digital parenting is essential in the current era of media boom. Parents need to role-model mindful media use. They should mentor their children regarding advantages and hazards of media use and online etiquette and encourage them to be a responsible digital citizen. Parents need to update themselves regarding the latest digital innovations like artificial intelligence, closely monitor the online lives of their children, set limits and boundaries, and keep the channels of communication open to navigate risks like cyberbullying and online sexual solicitation. They should ensure that recreational screen time should not interfere with scholastic pursuits, exercise, hobbies, in-person family interactions, and sleep. Digital fasting days/schedule and media-free zones (kitchen, bedroom, car, dining table) should be specified by the parents to reduce screen usage.

CONCLUSION

Parents should provide children with positive feedback and opportunities to grow and reflect in adolescence. Health, happiness, movement toward a promising future, and offering them chances to strengthen their skills and develop a sense of competence, usefulness, and belonging constitutes the matrix of parenting an adolescent.

SUGGESTED READING

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Adolescent Counseling

This is the second edition of the book on "Adolescent Counseling", which contains skills and practical techniques for counseling adolescents with behavioral, emotional, scholastic, media, relationship, and mental health issues. It has a special section that focuses on imbibing counseling skills through case-based discussions. This book will be helpful to manage adolescent issues through the lens of positive youth development and in imparting parental guidance. It will be useful for healthcare providers, school counselors, teachers, and parents in understanding the basic principles and practice of counseling. This book with 32 chapters authored by eminent adolescent pediatricians, child and adolescent psychiatrists, psychologists, and social scientists with over three decades of counseling experience would be of immense help to all those who are involved in adolescent care and counseling.



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