

# Elements of Adjustment Process in Adolescents: Suggestions for Counselling

Ifeanyi Mathew Azuji, Uju Christiana Nwanna

*Department of Guidance and Counselling, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Akwa, Anambra State, Nigeria*

**Abstract:** The issue of adjustment has been a major challenge to adolescents, especially those in the secondary schools. This paper highlighted some of the major challenges of the adolescents with regard to the elements that constitute their adjustment problems, issues associated with the adolescent's adjustment process and the necessary fundamentals to their adjustment process. Based on these, the researcher made suggestions for counselling.

**Paper Focus:** Adolescents, elements of adjustments, counselling, suggestions

## I. INTRODUCTION

The problems that tend to be part of adolescence have often been emphasized as somewhat an issue of concern to many, including the family, the school and the society at large. Globally, gang violence, bloody fights in school, alcohol related accidents, drug abuse, and in some extreme cases, suicide involving adolescents are all too frequently reflected in news headline and movie plots. In some research too, such as Arnett (2004), adolescents are frequently portrayed as a negative stage of life, a period of storm and stress to be survived or endured.

Adolescence is an important time for establishing the social position of individuals. During this time, young people are exposed to a wide range of new social situations, such as parties, bars and concerts. As a result, young people tend to come into contact, not only with friends, but also with strangers, compelling them to learn and develop new social roles without the supervision of their parents. WHO (2012) defined adolescence as transitional stage of physical and mental human development generally occurring between puberty and legal adulthood, but largely characterized as beginning and ending with teenage stage. Moreover, according to Erikson's stage of human development, an adolescent is a person between the ages of 13 and 19. During this period peer relationships play a critical role in the development of social skills and the feelings that are essential for personal growth and adjustment (Hahn & Payne, 2001). The possession of social skills such as effective communication can lead to a more positive social self-image and may determine the degree to which adolescents are able to succeed in their peer group (Klingman, 1992).

However, by the end of the secondary school years, young people have developed a unique combination of characteristics that appear to have a profound influence on their path to adult life (Green, 2013). How these life-shaping individual characteristics come about, nevertheless, remains a

central focus of developmental interest. On the other hand, according to Jones and Meyer (2009), an individual's genetic endowment plays a significant role in the personality development, but these genetic influences are not 100% determinant of adult personality traits, and, as Klingman (1992) observed, it is clear that contextual and experiential factors either dampen or amplify the effects of what constitute the variables.

Adolescence is a critical period in which significant changes occur both within the individual (e.g., physiologically, cognitively, psychologically) and externally (e.g., peer pressure). For an adolescent in a less developed society like Nigeria, such changes are challenging, often difficult, and occasionally very stressful. Most adolescents in this category may show no psychopathology, and their overall rate is only slightly higher than that for other age groups.

Barr-Anderson, Van den Berg, Neumark-Sztainer & Story (2008) in their study stated that experiences of emotional and behavioral problems during early to mid-adolescence play a significant role in shaping adult personality and adjustment process. Consistent with a growing number of observable evidence, it is thus assumed that the experience of these adjustment problems may involve a complex interactive process between the growing adolescent's family, community, and school environments and the dispositional characteristics the adolescent brings to these environments. However, the idea that the individual's movement toward competence or distress involves a subtle interplay between social context and biological or character factors are now well accepted. One would then ask; what then is adjustment?

Adjustment according to Britanica.com (n.d) refers to a process of altering behavior to reach a harmonious relationship with the environment. Adjustment was further defined as the behavioral process by which humans and other animals maintain equilibrium among their various needs or between their needs and the obstacles of their environments (Ganai & Ashraf Mir, 2013). Thus, when people say they are in an "adjustment period" what they typically mean is that they are going through a process of change and are searching for some level of balance or acceptance with the environment, others, or themselves. Thus, a sequence of adjustment begins when a need is felt and ends when it is satisfied. Hungry people, for example, are stimulated by their physiological state to seek food. When they eat, they reduce the stimulating

condition that impelled them to activity, and they are thereby adjusted to this particular need.

Adjustment is a complex phenomenon and requires both macro level and in-depth micro level research and analyses (Erman, 1998). Bearing this in mind, the focus of this paper is on adolescents, their perceptions, feelings, experiences and what constitute their adjustment process to the aforementioned (environment, others and themselves). Hence, the focus of this paper entails exploring these elements of adjustment process, and factors associated with adolescents' adjustment process; possibly suggest strategies counsellors could use in order to adjust to varying life situations.

## II. ADJUSTMENT PROCESS

Adjustment process is a means rather than an end product (Obidigbo, 2004), as life is full of series of changes and challenges. This made people to always be in a process of changing by adopting new techniques. The process of adjustment in adolescents involves analyzing the developmental history of the individual from his or her birth onwards. In other words, the nature of adjustment process is decided by a number of factors, mostly internal needs and the external demands of the individual adolescent. Disparity and conflicts usually arise whenever there is conflict between the internal needs and the external demands of the individual. When this conflict arises, the individual can use three alternatives as suggested by Obidigbo (2004) to ward of this, namely;

- a. The individual can either inhibit or modify his internal needs or demand.
- b. The individual can alter his or her environment, and thus satisfy the need or demand, and
- c. He or she can employ defense mechanism to either deal directly with the demand or escape from it.

### *Elements to Be Adjusted To*

The process of life is not always smooth. In everyday life, people encounter many challenges and barriers between themselves and their goals. These challenges are referred to in this paper as those elements to be adjusted to. Thus, they usually manifest its self the more in adolescents, and hence require adjustment. They include:

### *Anxiety/ Fear*

Anxiety is an emotional state in which people feel uneasy, apprehensive, or fearful (Critchley, 2009). Adolescents usually experience anxiety about events they cannot control or predict, or about events that seem threatening or dangerous. For example, students taking an important test may feel anxious because they cannot predict the test questions or feel certain of a good grade. People often use the words fear and anxiety to describe the same thing. Fear also describes a reaction to immediate danger characterized by a strong desire to escape the situation.

Moreover, the physical symptoms of anxiety reflect a chronic readiness to deal with some future threat. These symptoms may include fidgeting, muscle tension, sleeping problems, and headaches (Critchley, 2009). As Critchley further noted, higher levels of anxiety may produce such symptoms as rapid heartbeat, sweating, increased blood pressure, nausea, and dizziness. So, most adolescents experience anxiety to some degree. Many of them also feel anxious when faced with a new situation, such as when trying to do something well, such as performing in public or giving a public speech.

According Prof C.A. Nwankwo (personal communication, September 22, 2012), a mild to moderate amount of anxiety in these situations is normal and even beneficial. Thus in this situation, anxiety could motivate people to prepare for an upcoming event and can help keep them focused on the task at hand. However, too little anxiety or too much anxiety can cause problems. The reason being that, individuals who feel no anxiety when faced with an important situation may lack alertness and focus.

### *Conflict*

An American psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, proposed a related series of psychosocial stages of personality growth that more strongly emphasize social influences within the family. Erikson's eight stages span the entire life course, and, contrary to Freud's stages, each involves a conflict in the social world with two possible outcomes. In infancy, for example, the conflict is "trust vs. mistrust" based on whether the baby is confident that others will provide nurturance and care. In adolescence, "identity vs. role confusion" defines the teenager's search for self-understanding. Erikson's theory thus emphasizes the interaction of internal psychological growth and the support of the social world. More so, this conflict according to Tallen (1978) refers to an existent of incompatible goals. They are described in terms of the goal an adolescent tries to achieve (approach), and those that he/she tries to avoid (Avoidance).

### *Stress*

Stress can have both positive and negative effects. Stress is a normal, adaptive reaction to threat. It signals danger and prepares one to take defensive action. Fear of things that pose realistic threats motivates individuals to deal with them or avoid them. Stress also motivates one to achieve and tend to fuel creativity. Although stress may hinder performance on difficult tasks, moderate stress seems to improve motivation and performance on less complex tasks. In adolescents peer relationships, stress often leads to less cooperation and more aggression.

### *Elements of Adjustment Process*

The social development of adolescent is best considered in the context in which it occurs; that is, relating to peers, family, school, work, and community. One of the most obvious changes in adolescence is that the hub around which the

adolescent's world revolves shifts from the family to the peer group.

Peer group serve a number of important functions throughout adolescence, providing temporary reference point for developing sense of identity. Through identification with peers, adolescence begins to develop moral judgment and values (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995). Another important function of peer group is to provide adolescents with source of information about the world outside of the family and about themselves. It also serves as a powerful reinforcer during adolescence as a source of popularity, prestige and acceptance. Being accepted by peers has very important implications for adjustment, especially during adolescence.

### III. ADOLESCENTS' SELF-AWARENESS

Personal growth and development requires adolescents to become self-aware. It is a critical dimension of self-regulation and the ability of adolescents to relate to others (Logan-Greene, Nurius, Herting, Thompson, & Walsh, 2011). Through self-awareness, adolescents discover and appreciate their strengths and uniqueness. They learn what is important to them and what they value most. They identify their beliefs and how those beliefs help or hinder their personal growth and success. They become aware of the authentic self and learn to harness the power of the mind. According to Logan-Greene, et al., the self-awareness process is a realistic self-appraisal and involves the discovery and acceptance of all aspects of oneself.

#### *Adolescents Perceptions*

To understand people, it is important to see things as they do, hence it is important to see through their eyes. People are best understood when one could share with them their understandings, and the way one see people obviously affect the way he or she will relate to them. For instance, adolescents whose understanding of themselves is contrary to fact, as in the case with some teens who are quite adequate, even superior, but who see themselves as inferior, may be ineffective and clumsy in their relationship with people, if such adolescents could improve the understanding of themselves, then the relationship with people will equally improve.

Adolescent's perceptions of his or her self are of great significance in the adjustment process. Such perception is referred to by Tallen (1978) as "self image". Much of the adolescents self image is beyond their personal awareness, and one can only infer, but one can gain a better knowledge of the self through introspection.

Asking the question "who am I" can reveal the significant aspect of adolescents self image. Self image may be referred to the extent to which a person feels worthy or adequate. One's ethnic group, one's social role or status or some incidents that had an impact in a person's life can affect the self image.

#### *Adolescents' Self esteem/ Self concept*

Self esteem refers to all the ideas an adolescent holds of the self that can be regarded as 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'bad'. Adolescents who have a good opinion of themselves are much likely to be well adjusted, such people usually have self-respect and confidence. They usually believe in their ability to reach their set goals and do not blame themselves or feel less of themselves if they do not.

On the contrary, adolescents that are maladjusted usually have low self esteem; they lack confidence and tend to have negative ideas of the self. Most adolescents in this category perceive the self as failure and do not believe anything good could come out of them. For example, maltreated children who feel good about themselves may process risk situations differently by attributing different reasons to the environments they experience and, thereby, avoid producing negative internalized self-perceptions. Again, adolescent, especially students self-evaluate and judge themselves, forming outcome expectancies of success or failure. If the evaluation is positive, the learner is motivated, viewing the task as a challenge and persevering in the face of any perceived adversity. If the evaluation is negative, the student becomes anxious and tends to avoid the task. So, internal perceptions, interpretations, and expectancies primarily determine motivation and performance (Schmakel, 2008).

Moreover, it is through self-perception that an individual starts building their self-identity (Tallen, 1978). It is an adolescent's vision of a desired future that causes him or her to select the particular road that he or she chooses, from among many possibilities. Community response, sometimes sage, sometimes shattering, provides an adolescent with a sense of where his/her boundaries are and who and what he/she will become.

It is this very unique combination of adolescents' individual interests, needs, wishes, defenses (psychological elements), physical features such as his gender, strengths, limitations (biological elements), coupled with social response (social elements), that combine to form what Erik Eriksson (1968) refer to as adolescents' sense of "ego identity." Eriksson's attempts to define and understand ego identity seek ultimately to explain how adolescents come to find meaningful directions in the search for a way into adult life.

Erikson (1968) refers both to a conscious sense of individual uniqueness as well as an unconscious striving for continuity of experience; an optimal identity is experienced as a psychosocial sense of well-being. Ego identity's most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of knowing where one is going, and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count.

Also, how a person sees his 'world' is equally of great importance (Tallen, 1978). Some adolescent have a very realistic view of their environment while some others view

their world as hostile, rejecting and full of unfriendly people. They are very dependent and required some help in order to adjust.

#### *Self-Discipline*

Self-discipline refers to self-regulation; the ability of adolescents to set goals, delay gratification to attain a long-term goal, and develop coping skills to overcome setbacks. Research indicates that adolescents connecting to possibilities; a positive vision for their future and their aspirations, is one of the greatest indicators of a student's success in school (Barker, 2003) so, it is the possible selves that provide the plans and strategies for the future that put the self in action.

Moreover, helping adolescents connect to a vision of their future provides them with the motivation to set and achieve goals. In the process of personal development, adolescents not only set external goals (I want to be a doctor and earn a large income), they also set personal goals (I want to be compassionate and help people). According to Reeve (2006). Connecting to a vision and setting the goals to reach it builds an emotional bridge between the self now and the, who they want to become, providing strong motivation for achievement.

#### *Motivation*

Motivation is what compels an individual to act or moves the individual to behave as they do. It is the energy that provides fuel for action. To understand people's behaviour, there is need to understand what motivates them.

Motivation can be either extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation according to Schmakel (2008) relies on effective incentives and providing direction or structure for achievement. Motivation comes from an expected external reward for a desired action or behavior. Intrinsic motivation occurs when an adolescent generate the motivation from within, discovering the satisfaction of accomplishment and taking pleasure in doing something just for the sake of doing it.

Extrinsic motivation according to Reeve (2006) is a short-term, immediate incentive designed to produce a desired outcome or behavior. However, extensive use of extrinsic motivators means sacrificing the intrinsic motivation adolescents developed over the long term. A reliance on outer motivational resources to accomplish the goals of education is to put at risk students' later ability to generate their own motivation to accomplish the strivings they have for themselves.

#### *Resilience*

Resilience as define by Benard (2004) is the positive capacity of people to cope with stress and adversity. This coping may result in the individual "bouncing back" to a previous state of normal functioning, or using the experience of exposure to adversity to produce a "steeling effect" and function better than expected (much like an inoculation gives one the

capacity to cope well with future exposure to disease). Resilience is most commonly understood as a process, and not a trait of an individual.

According to Benard (2004), resilience is a dynamic process that individuals exhibit positive behavioral adaptation when they encounter significant adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of Stress (biology). Resilience is a two-dimensional construct concerning the exposure of adversity and the positive adjustment outcomes of that adversity. This two-dimensional construct implies two judgments: one about a "positive adaptation" and the other about the significance of risk (or adversity). One point of view about adversity such as Benard (2004) could define it as any risks associated with negative life conditions that are statistically related to adjustment difficulties, such as poverty, children of mothers with schizophrenia, or experiences of disasters. Positive adaptation, on the other hand, is considered in a demonstration of manifested behaviour on social competence or success at meeting any particular tasks at a specific life stage.

Resilience has been shown to be more than just the capacity of individuals to cope well under adversity. Resilience is better understood as both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2007).

Resilience according to Ungar can be described by viewing:

- good outcomes regardless of high-risk status,
- constant competence under stress,
- recovery from trauma, and
- Using challenges for growth that makes future hardships more tolerable.

Resilience in this case, according to Bonanno, Galea, Bucciareli, Vlahov (2007) describes adolescents who are expected to adapt successfully even though they experience risk factors that 'stack the odds' against them experiencing good development. Risk factors are related to poor or negative outcomes. For example, poverty, low socioeconomic status, and mothers with schizophrenia are coupled with lower academic achievement and more emotional or behavioral problems. The risk factors may be cumulative, carrying additive and exponential risks when they co-occur. However, when these risk factors happen, resilient children are capable of resulting in no behavioural problems and developing well. Additionally, they are more active and socially responsive. These positive outcomes are attributed to some protective factors, such as good parenting or positive school experiences.

#### *Adolescents' Emotion*

Emotional development during adolescence involves establishing a realistic and coherent sense of identity in the context of relating to others and learning to cope with stress

and manage emotions (Archibald, 2009), processes that is said to be a life-long issue for most people.

Emotion, like motivation involves the concept of movement in one way or the other, hence, emotion may be included in the total concept of motivation (Tallen, 1978). Emotions could be regarded as basically bodily reactions. In emotions like anger, fear, or even joy, there is clearly bodily involvement. Emotion is something that one is moved to do. One is often moved to tears, or to laughter, feeling of happiness, sadness or just being compassionate.

The effectiveness of one's life and the qualities of personal and social adjustment are considered to be largely a matter of emotions. Thus, when an adolescent is maladjusted, he or she is said to be 'emotionally disordered'. Emotion is usually felt or expressed so that they can be observed by another person. A maladjusted adolescent may feel tensed, angry or irritated most of the times, and in many cases, the feelings maybe quite obvious, and in some, concealed. However, when an adolescent expresses his or her emotions freely, it may be a sign that the adolescent is well adjusted.

#### *Factors Associated with Adolescent's Adjustment Process*

Several factors are found to modify the negative effects of adverse life situations, mostly as it concern adolescents. According to Prof. M.A. Anagbogu (Personal communication, August 17, 2016), the primary factor in helping an adolescent adjust is to have relationships that provide care and support, create love and trust, and offer encouragement, both within and outside the family. Additional factors are also associated with adolescent's adjustment process, like the capacity to make realistic plans, having self-confidence and a positive self image, developing communications skills, and the capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses.

*Making Realistic Plans and Taking Action:* Dealing with adversity requires that adolescents be able to think clearly. For most of adolescents, this is usually difficult in crises. Emotions may cloud their thinking. It may act as filter through which they view their world. For most adolescents in Nigeria, with a rarely recognized severe emotional disorder, the filter seldom comes off, being able to see what is, rather than what they would like or what they would fear, is considered part of the skill. According to Breazeale (2011), being able to take action proactively rather than reactively or impulsively, being able to behave assertively rather than aggressively or passively is critical to adolescents' ability to adjust to harsh conditions.

Every adolescent and indeed, every one, in some forms or another wants to be successful and achieve their dreams, but most of the time, they are very blur with what they want and do not have any realistic plan to do what it takes to be successful at it. More often than not, they rely much on luck and chance to get it. The best example in this case is a child who wanted to get rich, but only have one idea to do it, relying on playing and trying to win lotto. This is

possible, but, perhaps if one should ask, what is the real possibility of it happening? So, creating a realistic plan in order to achieve the desired results is vital in any case, not minding how high or low ones hopes are.

*Positive self-Image and Self Esteem:* There is a saying that 'only you can make yourself happy'. As common as it may seem, it may equally be true. This is because a survey of adolescents by American Psychological Association has shown that the most important factor for happiness and well-being is self esteem. Also important were feelings of independence and competency which is often brought about by self-esteem. It may however be surprising that common traits like popularity, power, money and luxury were in this case rated the lowest.

Therefore, having a positive self-image may be difficult, especially if one is affected by life's hardships, such as disability, poor health or financial or other major problems. In the case of adolescents however, improving the self-image and self-esteem nonetheless can in turn, improve the other aspect of their lives like success in their academic, health, relationship with peers and a healthy and positive relationship with the opposite sex.

For these adolescents, improving self-image, like improving other skills takes time and practice. Developing good self esteem involves encouraging a positive (but realistic) attitude toward oneself and the world around, and appreciating one's worth, while at the same time behaving responsibly towards others.

By working from the inside out (focusing on the way he or she thinks before changing the circumstance around), adolescents can build self esteem. The goal of positive thinking is to give oneself a more positive self-concept, while seeing self honestly and accepting self, and removing the internal barriers that keeps one from doing his best.

*Managing Feeling and Impulse:* This has to do with how people deal with difficult events that change their lives. The death of a loved one, loss of admission, serious illness, attacks like rape and other traumatic events: these are all examples of very challenging life experiences. Many adolescents and even adults react to such circumstances with a flood of strong emotions and a sense of uncertainty. The ability to adapt well over time to such life changing situation is what American Psychological Association (APA, 2014) in one of their article referred to as "the road to resilience". What enables an adolescent to cope with such difficult life situation involves resilience, an ongoing process that requires time and effort, and engages people in taking a number of steps. Resilience in that regard is further defined by APA as process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress such as problems relating with parents and peers, serious health problems and other stressors. It means bouncing back from difficult experiences.

Moreover, being resilient does not mean that the adolescent do not experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives. In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve a considerable emotional distress. Also, resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have, it involves behaviours, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in every adolescents, and indeed, everyone. Other important factors associated with adolescents' adjustment process according to Pritchard, Wilson and Yamnitz (2007). Includes;

*The need for positive regard:* With an adolescent's awareness of self, the need for positive regard from others develops. The satisfaction of this need is dependent on inferences regarding the experiential field of others. The satisfaction of this need is reciprocal in human beings; this is because one's positive regard is satisfied when one perceives oneself as satisfying another's need. The positive regard of a significant social other can be more powerful than the individual's valuing process of an organism.

#### *Development of the condition of worth*

Adolescents self-regard becomes selective as significant others discriminate the self experiences of the individual as more or less worthy of positive regard. The evaluations of self experience as more or less worthy of self regard constitute a condition of worth. If an adolescent experiences only unconditional positive regard, it would limit the development of conditions of worth and lead to unconditional self-regard, to congruence of the need for positive regard and self regard with the evaluation of the organism, and to the maintenance of psychological adjustment.

#### IV. SUGGESTIONS FOR COUNSELLING

The issues of adjustment that take place during adolescence require counselling, hence the following suggestions for counselling:

Firstly, adolescents need attention. Adolescents have specific characteristics that need to be taken into consideration in policies and programmes and in the strategies to reach this section of the population with proper guidance and counselling that is geared towards health promotion, prevention, treatment and care.

Secondly, adolescents are not all the same. During adolescence the components of physical and psychosocial development take place at different speeds and duration, even if the sequence is universal. Guidance and counselling programmes need to take into consideration the heterogeneity of adolescents, including the differing developmental phases and abilities of younger and older adolescents and of adolescent girls and boys.

Thirdly, some adolescents are particularly vulnerable. The environments in which some adolescents live, learn and grow can undermine their physical, psychosocial

and emotional development, for example, where adolescents lack parental guidance and support, or are surrounded by violence, exploitation and abuse. The guidance and counselling programmes need to specifically and explicitly address these adolescents to protect, respect and fulfill their rights to the highest attainable standard of health.

Fourthly, adolescent development has implications for adolescent health. Developmental changes during adolescence have broad implications for their overall adjustment process during adolescence. School Guidance service delivery programmes need to put into consideration the elements of adjustment process to respond to adjustment problems related to the developmental changes taking place.

Lastly, adolescent development has health implications throughout life. Adolescence provides opportunities to make up, both physically and mentally, for developmental deficits in the first decade of life. At the same time, health interventions are needed in adolescence to build on the investments made during the first decade, in order to maintain positive momentum for transitions to adulthood and adjustment throughout life.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that whenever the adolescent exhibits undesirable behaviour, it is often because he has certain physical and personality needs that must be satisfied. Whether he is shy or aggressive, reckless or negatively idealistic, helpful or impudent, all depends on the needs which are active at the time of such behaviour and how he goes about satisfying them. Since his behaviour always has a motive, the important question to ask in dealing with the behaviour is what need of this particular adolescent is being met by this mode of behaviour? Once identified, the teacher or parent should then help the adolescent to satisfy the need in more socially acceptable ways.

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