Self-Efficacy in Early Adolescence

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Most of us would agree that adolescence is a stage with important changes (social, physical and emotional) that have a long lasting effect on an individual’s entire life. Examples include achieving identity (e.g moral, rational and sexual), independence (e.g permission for driving, or taking other decisions) and developing interdependent peer and romantic relationships. It is also the stage when conflicts start emerging with parents and other social elements (e.g authorities, peers); some examples might include - the urge to be popular among peers, competing in academics or sports, creating unrealistic unachievable goals and perfectionism. An important factor during this stage that affects one’s development is self-efficacy (belief in one’s ability towards a particular task/domain). Adolescents with low self-efficacy are known to develop behavioral and emotional problems in later stages of life. Co-existing psychological issues, if any, might complicate the situation and such individuals might result in developing complex psychological disorders, getting emotionally abused (bullied), being overly conscious, inability to regulate their emotions and at times even unable to communicate their feelings and needs during later parts of the lives. Low self-efficacy over extended period of time can cause negative effects (suppression of ability), low self-efficacy across multiple domains (low self-esteem), which might cause the individual to internalize it as an inability (of self). In long term, it can develop as a disability and qualify as a psychological disorder. A negative belief about self appearance (body image) might develop into an eating-disorder, anxiety and depression. Lack of attachment, care, social skills and academic failures can create mistrust and impact relationships; leading to social withdrawal and social anxiety.
Hence, it becomes essential to be able to identify such issues and take steps for building high self-efficacy during adolescence.

The term self-efficacy was coined by Albert Bandura (1986) as part of his social-cognitive theory. Self-efficacy can be defined as perceived capability of self with respect to a particular domain. Self-esteem is defined as overall perceived valuation of self across all domains. Erikson (Moshman, pp 119) says, adolescents are typically in a state of identity crisis and gradually construct their identity, and developmental problems in childhood may result in negative outcomes (alternatives to positive ones) like mistrust (alternative to trust), shame (the alternatives to autonomy), guilt (the alternative to initiative), inferiority and futility (the alternatives to industry). Self-efficacy is similarly known to develop with preconceived notions of self, perceived belief about self and others in society and active interactions with family and peers. Self-efficacy is considerably affected by successes (and failures) during childhood and early adolescence, which might cause the individual to either avoid a task completely (negative outcome or low self-efficacy) or gaining expertise with repetition (positive outcome or high self-efficacy).

According to (Smethna, pp 65), development in adolescence can be classified into three main areas – moral, conventional and psychological aspects, all involving conflicts. She states that conflicts with parents increases considerably during this stage. Inaffective parenting styles (authoritarian, uninvolved) which are often because of migration between geographies, low socio-economic status, cultural regulations, and parents having issues with themselves can have a detrimental effect on adolescent’s well being. Additionally, secrecy and lying if misinterpreted can lead to bigger conflicts. These conflicts can result in positive (high self-efficacy) outcomes and negative (low self-efficacy) outcomes. As an example adolescents in western society tend to
have high *self-efficacy* in dating, most likely because of social approval (positive beliefs in society), parent support and responsive peers. A failure in relationship may not internalized as an inability, and individuals are more likely to have better and effective (more stable with high *self-efficacy*) relationships in late adulthood. Other positive outcomes include low rates of emotional abusive, more independence and more time for self. Eastern cultures in general encourage dating and at a later stage (late adulthood), and hence individuals seem to have low *self-efficacy*. Failure is easily internalized within self as an inability and such cases are normally viewed negatively by society. This tends to result in negative outcomes like – long lasting emotionally abusive relationships and individuals are less likely to recover from failure. A similar observation is lower *self-efficacy* among women students in STEM careers, which seems to be due to of lack of support from peers, families and unpopular beliefs in the society.

Various steps can be taken to develop high *self-efficacy* for adolescents. Parents/Teachers need to be encouraged to use authoritative parenting (or control) and made aware of psychological issues that may emerge during this stage. Being in a parenting support group to know the current policies, conventions, sharing and discussing positive and negative outcomes might be very helpful. Responsive communication (with justification) with adolescents on various aspects can yield in positive results. Finally, developing better self-regulatory skills (among parents as well as adolescents) can help in managing stress and conflicts in an effective way.

In earlier times, expectations for adults were few and it was not necessary for an individual to participate in all spheres of life (e.g. study, work, parent, manage finances). Early psychologists believed that majority the development happened in the first ten years of life. With change in time, newer expectations and needs like policies, financial status, independence, more
responsibility and use of technology have emerged which has made adult life more complex for an individual, who is normally involved in all these spheres. Hence, it becomes important that we cultivate high degrees of self-efficacy among adolescents for a better and healthier adulthood.

References:

