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SUPPORTING THE ADOLESCENT STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY: SOME ISSUES FOR THERAPISTS
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Introduction

Adolescence is a crisis, sometimes more severe than at other times, that represents a dual developmental task. The adolescent must successfully achieve the goal of autonomy or his/her quest or ability to define identity and achieve future intimacy will be blocked. This is well known. Less well known are the corresponding tasks of parents in supporting the developmental transition of their teenager. Frequently, the therapist is called in to “fix up” one party when the trauma is actually caused because both parties have failed to realize their mutually supportive roles during the search for autonomy. For LDS therapists working with LDS families, the issue is related to therapeutic tasks as well.

Developmental Tasks

Let’s begin by pinpointing the necessary developmental tasks of adolescents, a series synthesized from Erikson’s, Kohlberg’s, and Piaget’s work along with our own experiences and observations. The child has five tasks, some more obvious than others:
1. To come to terms with body changes;
2. To cope with sexual development and psychosexual drives while learning more about his/her sex roles;
3. To establish and confirm his/her sense of identity;
4. To synthesize his/her personality;
5. To struggle for independence and emancipation from the family.

Many parents have no clear concept of their own tasks in this process. They define adolescence as a terribly upsetting and confusing experience their children have in which their role is to deflect, defuse, and endure. In therapy, many parents express real relief at learning that part of their task as parents is to help the child become autonomous. A common view within the Church and society is that parents’ one duty is to tighten controls and multiply restrictions. While the parent is indeed responsible for setting limits and providing standards, the goal of those standards is to help the child achieve an autonomous identity, not just hack away at undesirable behavior. If we may use a gardening metaphor borrowed from Elder Packer, the parents are not trying to beat back a stream of water with the flat of the shovel. Instead, they are using the shovel to create a channel here, a bank there so that the experimentation, exploration, and limit-testing of the adolescent will be a creative experience rather than a destructive one.

The parents have six tasks:
1. To help the child complete his/her emancipation from the family to achieve autonomy;
2. To provide support and understanding;
3. To offer a favorable and appropriate environment for the child’s healthy development through acceptance, providing information, and being available for discussion;
4. To limit the child’s behavior and to set standards;
5. To recall his/her own adolescent difficulties, to accept and respect the adolescent’s differences and similarities, and to model respect for differences in others, thus letting a child know that there are a range of acceptable models for differences in addition to the parents themselves.
6. To relate to adolescents and the process of maturation and autonomy-seeking they are experiencing with a constructive sense of humor.

Acceptable Behavioral Characteristics

During this period, it is normal for the child to:
1. Display heightened physical strength and coordination;
2. Display occasional psychosomatic and somatopsychic disturbance;
3. Display maturing sex characteristics and proclivities;
4. Engage in oedipal conflicts that review and resolve earlier conflicts;
5. Exhibit inconsistent, unpredictable, and paradoxical behavior;
6. Explore and experiment with himself and the world;
7. Manifest eagerness for peer approval and strong peer relationships;
8. Develop strong moral and ethical perceptions;
9. Develop his/her ability to use deductive and inductive reasoning and operational thinking as part of an accelerated stage of cognitive development;
10. Be competitive in play;
11. Manifest erratic work-play patterns;
12. Develop his/her use of language and other symbols;
13. Manifest intense self-criticism and introspection;
14. Display great ambivalence toward parents, including anxiety over the loss of parental nurturing, a resistance to parental nurturing, and negative criticism that manifests itself in verbal aggression.

Paralleling these stages for the child is a list of acceptable

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behavioral characteristics for the parents. It is normal for parents to:
1. Allow and encourage reasonable independence;
2. Set fair rules and enforce them consistently;
3. Be compassionate and understanding even while being firm. Discipline should not be punitive or derogatory;
4. Feel and express pleasure and pride along with occasional guilt and disappointment;
5. Have other interests besides the child;
6. Have a fulfilling life apart from the child;
7. Express occasional intolerance, resentment, envy, or anxiety about the adolescent’s development.

It has also been helpful to give parents a range of behaviors so they do not go into this bewildering stage without some parameters. It is extremely helpful for parents to know that occasional anger and/or guilt over their performance as parents is normal. It also helps them understand that some turbulence and resistance from their children is also normal.

Minimum Psychopathology

In such a conflicted period, some turbulence is predictable. Some minimal psychopathology may be signaled by these prolonged symptoms on the child’s part:
1. Apprehensions, fears, guilt, and anxiety about sex, health, and school;
2. Defiant, negative, impulsive, or depressed behavior;
3. Frequent somatic or hypochondriacal complaints, occasionally taking the form of denying ordinary illnesses;
4. Irregular or deficient school performance;
5. Preoccupation with sex;
6. Poor or absent personal relationships with adults or peers;
7. Behavior that is either extremely immature or precocious; (Occasionally, an equally serious symptom is an unhinging personality and temperament.)
8. Unwillingness to assume responsibility for greater autonomy;
9. Inability to substitute or postpone gratifications;

Signs of minor psychopathology on the part of the parents may be indicated by these symptoms:
1. A sense of failure;
2. Greater disappointment than joy;
3. Indifference to the child or to the family in general;
4. Apathy and depression;
5. Persistent intolerance of a child;
6. Limited interests and self expression;
7. Loss of perspective about the child’s capacities;
8. Occasional direct or vicarious reversion to adolescent impulses;
9. Uncertainty about standards regarding sexual behavior and deviant social or personal activity.

Extreme Psychopathology

These minor symptoms can develop into extreme psychopathology. In the child such behavior manifests itself by:

1. Complete withdrawal into self and extreme depression;
2. Acts of delinquency, asceticism, ritualism, and overconformity;
3. Neuroses, especially phobias, persistent anxiety, compulsions, inhibitions, or constrictive behavior;
4. Persistent hypochondriases;
5. Sex aberrations;
6. Somatic illness, anorexia, colitis, menstrual disorders, etc.
7. Complete inability to maintain relationships with friends, perform at school, etc.
8. Psychoses.

Parallel disfunctions on the part of the parent that indicate extreme psychopathology are:
1. Severe depression and withdrawal;
2. Complete rejection of the child and/or family;
3. Inability to function in his/her family role;
4. Competition with the child;
5. Destructive or abusive behavior toward the child;
6. Seeing the child’s unacceptable sexual or aggressive behavior as a manifestation of his/her own vicarious impulses;
7. Perpetuating dependence in the preadolescent;
8. Overreacting to violations of sexual standards, social standards, or assertiveness on the part of the child;
9. Compulsive, obsessive, or psychotic behavior.

Issues for LDS Families

What are the particular consequences for LDS therapists dealing with LDS families? Rich and I have had the rather stimulating experience of viewing and discussing this topic from the point of view of therapists who also have children, some moving into this adolescent phase and others approaching it. The reality of that situation has checked what might be a temptation to theorize beyond an appropriate point.

It has been helpful for us to view the period of adolescence with a long-range view: What kind of resolution do we want? Many parents simply want some cessation to the turmoil, the confrontation, and the challenges. That’s a very natural reaction in the heat of battle. When someone asked Freud what he thought a normal person should be able to do well, he answered simply, “Leb en und arbeiten” (love and work). In short, the adolescent, if he/she accomplishes this developmental stage successfully, will be an autonomous person, able to choose work and do it successfully, and able to achieve intimacy with others.

It seems paradoxical that the achievement of intimacy and closeness must come after a process of separation, but it is true. It is also clear that we cannot really share ourselves with another person unless we have established our own identity. The principle of free agency further clarifies the idea that we have to be free, autonomous, and capable of independent action and thought to really give of ourselves. This parallels the principle of free agency and the principle of consecration. For example, one has to be free, autonomous, and separate in identity in order to consecrate oneself to God; that is, oneness with God is not a fusion but a giving of an independent soul toward a
mutually acceptable outcome. One cannot give what one does not know or have control over. As Erikson has observed:

It is only when identity formation is well on its way that true intimacy—which is really countering as well as a fusing of identities—is possible. Sexual intimacy is only a part of what I have in mind, for it is obvious that sexual intimacies often precede the capacity to develop a true and mutual psychosocial intimacy with another person, be it in friendship, in erotic encounters, or in joint inspiration. The youth is not sure of his identity, shies away from personal intimacy, or throws himself into acts of intimacy which are “promiscuous” without true fusion or real self abandon.

As therapists, we feel that one of the most helpful things we can do for our families—both for the adolescent and for the parents—is to clarify the tasks of each in working together for the outcome of an independent, loving person. In some respects, this means helping parents become comfortable with ambiguities and paradoxes. The developmental process includes a tension between the conflicting values of the parents, society, and the adolescent. Indeed, the developmental process is primarily characterized by those tensions. It is helpful for a therapist to realize that his/her role consists not in eliminating, or even sometimes in reducing, conflicts as much as it lies in teaching ways of dealing with these conflicts—in providing tools for appreciating and sustaining the paradoxes.

Father Lehi said succinctly, “For it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things.” U. Carlisle Hunsaker recently commented that this scripture should not be read as only an opposition between good and evil “but also between many competing goods.” He continued:

So many of the opposites we face in life are complementary opposites. Let us recall the context in which Lehi made his declaration concerning the necessity of opposition. He was giving counsel to his son, the main theme of which was that the joy of life must be experienced through, not around, opposition. The true adventure of life is to be experienced in attempting to achieve a workable harmony or synthesis between complementary opposites. I understand the joy of which Lehi spoke to be the subjective accomplishment of growth. Reality characterized in large measure by polar opposites provides us with a matrix for growth by providing us with the opportunity to achieve a fusion of such opposites; a fusion which becomes more than the sum of its parts. Such a fusion brings expansion to the soul, and hence joy.

In the context of Church beliefs, many clients feel conflicts in their parental roles, usually not because they are “bad” parents but because they are trying very hard to be “good” parents. Our intent here is to identify some of the predictable paradoxes and, rather than resolving them by arguing for one side to the exclusion of the other, describe them and suggest the benefits in recognizing and respecting the tensions inherent in them.

1. The first paradox involves the family’s theological understanding about what God wants. For parents who prize obedience and see it as the theological underpinning of the gospel, the attempts of the adolescent to achieve autonomy are very frequently labeled as “disobedience,” thus locking the parents and children into a struggle over means while the end (becoming an independent, loving person) sometimes is disregarded in the battle.

2. A second paradox might be labeled the “natural man” difficulty. As we have seen, the adolescent’s ability to come to terms with his/her maturing sexuality, acquire information about sexual roles, and explore appropriately his/her sexual behavior and/or feelings are core tasks in the developmental process. Furthermore, Latter-day Saints are theologically committed to what Elder James E. Talmage called “the eternity of sex.” Many parents make a near-absolute dichotomy between sensuality and spirituality, reacting with dismay and disapproval to any manifestation of adolescent sexuality and limiting their discussions of sex with their teenagers to “Don’t!” LDS parents are far from having a monopoly on this problem, but our very proper concern with premarital chastity sometimes takes the form of attempting to deny and suppress sexuality. You don’t, of course, need to be a therapist to know the futility of such an effort.

3. A third paradox might be labeled “stewardship vs. ownership.” Conscientious Mormon parents hear and accept messages about their responsibility for shaping the children’s values and behavior. This genuine stewardship, which has, we believe, eternal implications, can sometimes be translated into a sense of ownership where parents are unwilling or unable to let the child develop his/her sense of autonomy, let alone assist in that process. Parents may frequently respond to an adolescent’s request for increasing autonomy in two equally inappropriate ways: either they abruptly define rigid rules and recreate an earlier stage of dependence; or they establish premature independence. If the family supports only independence and ignores dependent needs, the teenager may be separated, without the skills and maturity to be fully autonomous. The teenager may thus have a bruising failure and return home defeated.

William G. Dyer, who has written about some types of parental behavior that reinforce dependency rather than fostering healthy independence and interdependence, cited the example of Jane N., a college sophomore who calls home “at least three times a week” to ask her parents’ advice on her classes, on purchases, on activities, and on relationships with fellow students and her roommates. Until she has talked things over with her parents, she feels very insecure about making a decision. Her parents are “very pleased” and proudly tell their friends “that Jane is a real home girl who loves her family—not one of those wild types of college students.” They are deeply satisfied by Jane’s obvious need for them. Dyer further suggests that the parents would be angry and hurt if someone suggested that they were selfishly using their daughter to meet their own needs instead of nurturing her own largely suppressed need to be a separate person. In such a case, it is sometimes helpful for parents to realize that a defensive and hostile attitude toward the larger society is counterproductive in helping their children establish the needed autonomy.

Conscientious LDS parents who are rightly concerned about undesirable influences from a negative peer group may overreact and try to isolate the adolescent within the family circle, thus depriving him/her of mirrors for reflection at a time when the child desperately needs peer input to determine his/her own identity. As Erikson has observed, the search for identity “normally” takes the form of overidentifying with heroes of cliques and crowds.
Falling in love is not so much a sexual relationship as it is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffused self-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified. This is why so much of young love is conversation.” Even in the “clannish, intolerant, and cruel” behavior that excludes others over trivial matters of dress, speech, or social class, Erikson reminds parents that it is important “to understand in principle (which does not mean to condone in all of its manifestations) that such intolerance may be, for a while, a necessary defense against a sense of identity loss.”

4. A fourth paradox is that extremely conscientious parents may not meet their child’s need for autonomy because they are not dealing with their own continuing needs for individuality and autonomy as adults. By presenting the child with a model of parenting that includes no separate time or activities apart from the children, parents may give a negative picture of parenting to their children, present inadequate models for a healthy marital relationship, and “smother” the child by obsessive attention or too many rules. The overly “good” parent is really an ineffective parent.

For example, one girl in her first year of college, the oldest child in the family, was suffering deep depression even though she came from a stable home with an adequate income and had always achieved well in school. She was writing to a missionary and felt, bitterly, that she would end up marrying him because everyone expected it, even though it was a relationship in which she did most of the giving. Kris’s mother, though a conscientious and hard-working woman, was not emotionally warm and mainly communicated a sense of duty as her motivation. Although she was a college graduate, she did not acknowledge Kris for her achievements in school, and her main reaction to Kris’s winning a scholarship was to make her feel guilty for deserting her younger sister: “I don’t know what Norene will do without you.” As someone described the mother, she considered “sacrifice . . . one of the finest virtues. Her bent back, carious [sic] teeth, lack of concern for style and grooming, and confinement in a small crowded home overrun by children would present a model far from attractive to an intelligent, ambitious, pretty young girl who might well wonder about the obvious rewards of self-sacrifice.” The mother’s relationship with the father was far from satisfactory as well. She was jealous of affection displayed between the father and daughter, yet was not an affectionate person herself.

Clearly, this mother did not recognize and nurture individuality in her daughter and presumably in her other children. Possibly she had never achieved a satisfactory resolution to her own crisis and postponed her own need to achieve autonomy by immersing herself in the tasks of caring for her numerous children.

5. A fifth paradox occurs when the messages given by our intra-Church culture conflicts with messages given by our larger society. An example that is particularly problematic for adolescents working through the individuation crisis involves gender roles. Our society, like most societies, applies a great deal of pressure on maturing boys and girls to enforce compliance with certain gender expectations. Usually these expectations swiftly lead to stereotypes. Instead of allowing an adolescent to have an identity that integrates both passive and active components, instrumental and expressive, productive and nurturant elements, the message can be clearly given that certain traits are appropriate to only one sex.

Children can be particularly confused when a father who relies on “authority” for his masculine identity feels compromised in his ability to express his nurturant side, failing to set an example for his sons of well-integrated masculinity and for his daughters an example of a husband who can be expressive as well as authoritative. Similarly, the mother who relies on her homemaking and child rearing roles may compromise her ability to express her own creative capabilities, thus teaching her sons to look for wives who have limited ideas of what they can do and teaching her daughters by example that passivity is rewarded.

A frequent example encountered in therapy is the boy with feminine behavior whose parents are “sure there’s something wrong with him.” Very frequently, the root of the problem is a paralyzing struggle between the boy’s own emerging needs for autonomy and his fear of losing his mother’s nurturing which he attempts to “buy” by behavior that conforms to this feminine ideal. Encouraging movement toward autonomy has been a way of teaching such boys that they can have intimacy as well-integrated personalities, rather than as emotional clones of one parent or the other. Usually, the parents’ efforts to teach the boy more “manly” behavior involves stereotyped injunctions to “be tough. Don’t cry. Do it on your own.” A boy who is acutely aware of his need for nurture will not find such an image of masculinity appealing.

Usually such parents do not realize the extent to which they have contributed to the problem by not helping the boy sort out conflicting messages from his dual culture. At Primary and Sacrament meeting, boys are taught to “turn the other cheek; don’t get angry; be nice,” typically underscored by the mother who wants him to “be good” while the frustrated father is ordering him to “stop crying; hit him back, don’t put up with this,” thus articulating the message of the larger culture which the boy will see in exaggerated form on television.

Thus it is ironic that while the church culture encourages obedience and loving, it may punish appropriate assertive behavior while the larger society is simultaneously punishing loving behavior and rewarding aggression.

The paradox for boys is paralleled by that for girls, even though it receives far less attention because the cultural message of both Church and society reinforce each other. Girls may be taught to be passive, to take care of others’ needs, to conform, and to please. Thus, they do not “cause problems” in the same way that aggressive boys do. Their confusion may not surface until they rebel by seeking their own sexual pleasure or over-conform by feeling unable to deny a sexual suitor—never having been taught how to say no. Some may postpone for years learning the psychological costs of passivity; their depression and confusion may actually be far more pervasive than the more conspicuous confusion with cultural messages manifest by their young male counterparts. As a result, LDS therapists can expect to see increasing numbers of
them as clients.

In short, as these five paradoxes show, the demands of dealing with reality prevent a simple either/or choice from being successful as a permanent solution. In our thinking, the basic issue comes down to the therapist's willingness to forego simple answers and their undeniable but short-term comfort in favor of the more difficult but ultimately more rewarding task of helping the client (either the adolescent or his/her parents) recognize the complexities of the task and the potential for growth or synthesis. In such cases, the children have often heard about the need to follow rules and commandments, as if they were the religious goal. We would suggest that learning the rules and keeping the commandments is essential but that our religious goal is to integrate the principles behind the rules into our lives so that we want to conform to God's will, rather than feeling obliged to conform to his will as manifest in the rules. In the ideal situation, we will have a relationship with a loving Father. Instead, all too frequently we see a relationship primarily with a rule. Similarly, God is often described as a being who establishes rules and metes out rewards and punishments, rather than a being whose predominant characteristic is his love for us.

C. S. Lewis' popular parable, *Screwtape Letters*, elucidates the paradox of the issue through the voice of the senior devil, Screwtape, coaching a junior devil through a difficult case:

To us a human is primarily food; our aim is the absorption of its will into ours, the increase of our own area of selfhood at its expense. But the obedience which the Enemy [meaning God] demands of men is quite a different thing. One must face the fact that all the talk about his love for men, and his service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of himself—creatures whose lives, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like his own, not because he has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to his. We want cattle who can finally become food; he wants servants who can finally become sons.

The process of maturation involves a coming to terms with a genuine paradox, a legitimate source of struggle in which "there must needs be opposition in all things." The legitimacy of that struggle does not, however, mean that all outcomes are equal. On the contrary, they throw into higher relief the value of what is struggled for. What the therapist should not do, in our opinion, is to shortcircuit that struggle with easy outs and facile answers. It is much more valuable for the therapist to sustain and support the individual in thinking through, talking through, and in some cases, working through the consequences of that tension between opposites. The resolution, when it comes, will not be the final answer, although it may clearly resolve the immediate identity crisis. The same issues will return on a different level to be worked through or be reintegrated later; and if the client has acquired the tools in the first struggle, he/she will be better equipped to find a solution which honors both the self and the demands of external reality.

In this far from simple situation, the LDS therapist may indeed look upon the paradox as redemptive. Therapist, parents, and adolescents within the LDS culture and context can find resolution of the adolescent identity crisis easier if it is perceived, not as a battle, but as a paradox, where the task of all concerned is to insure identity, individuation, and intimacy—can we say love—not only to one's self, but to others and to God.

Endnotes