

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Understanding Families : Family Development and Transition Points

In the same way that individuals have their own developmental pathway over time, families also grow and change. "Family Life Span" or "Family Life Cycle" are common terms used to describe this developmental course. A family life span or cycle includes common transition points that families experience, as a way of pinpointing times of change and/or potential stress on the family unit.

This help sheet examines how a family's life cycle may intersect or interact with a young person's developmental trajectory, and the implications of this for your work.

Typical Transition Points

Typical family transition points may include:

- a couple relationship becoming more committed (eg move in together or marry);
- birth of a child (and subsequent children);
- child starting primary school and then secondary school;
- child becoming an adolescent;
- work/study changes;
- child getting a driver's licence;
- child leaving home (first and last child leaving home in particular);
- parent/s retiring from work;
- birth of grandchildren;
- death of parent/s.

Adolescence as a Transition Point

The stage of adolescent development involves immense physical, cognitive and emotional changes for young people. This is the stage between being a child and an adult, and young people may swing between the two as they strive for autonomy and individuation. They may seek to spend more time with peers and confide in them, and become more private and appear to be disinterested in family.

De-idealisation of parents often occurs, an important stage in the process of individuation. Parents no longer fill the role of idealised adults, and other individuals start to fill this role, such as celebrities, peers or intimate partners.

Some cultures have rituals or initiation ceremonies, which mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. "Aussie" ceremonies are often less formal, and may include:

- a Debutante Ball;
- having a beer with Dad;

- getting a driver's licence, and/or first car;
- leaving school;
- leaving home;
- getting a job;
- starting a new, intimate relationship.

The process of separation between a child and caregiver/s at the time of adolescence can be both difficult and empowering for the child and the parent. Both parties are called upon to cope with the changes and dilemmas involved in this 'separation'.

Teenagers asserting their independence can be a really unexpected change for some families. Parents are often under prepared for the changes in long-held roles with the young person, and this stage involves significant shifts in the relationship with the child and in parenting approaches.

Parents may be dealing with an adolescent for the first time. Parenting is often done 'on the hop' and the stresses associated with this, combined with the changes occurring for the young person, can result in conflict, blame, anger and at times, rejection. This stage can also involve immense grief and loss, as well as confusion, helplessness and fear, for some caregivers.

These parenting challenges may also occur when parent/s are juggling a range of responsibilities, eg. other children, work, household duties, pressures from partners and extended families, society's judgments upon them and their commitment and ability.

Although it is often referred to as a process of separation, it is useful to think of it as a process of moving from dependence to inter-dependence or a more reciprocal, more adult-to-adult relationship. This approach recognises that strong and healthy relationships are important for ongoing development.

Youth workers help parents and other family members at this stage by sharing their understanding of adolescent development. Families can be greatly assisted by the provision of general information regarding the

developmental change associated with this transition. Young people and families may also be helped to identify and think about how they have managed to negotiate earlier transition points.

Leaving home as a transition point

A child leaving home is another highly significant transition point for caregivers. It involves changes to long-held roles, and a need to refocus attention on other people or activities.

This transition point often involves changes in the relationship between parents, also. It may give parents the opportunity to re-examine their commitment to and feelings for each other. The “hard truths” about the relationship may surface, and unresolved relationship issues may need to be worked through.

Some parents may put more effort into their relationship to help it to become more satisfying for the years to come. It is not uncommon, however, for parents to separate around this time. Young people who have left home, or moved on, are still affected by these family changes, and may need support and help to deal with these changes and the effect on their role in the family.

Unique Transition Points

As well as the typical transition points in families, there will be other unexpected events which will serve as transition points, producing big shifts in the functioning of a family. These may include:

- parental separation;
- parents establishing new relationships;
- illness;
- unexpected death;
- unemployment;
- financial difficulties;
- onset of mental illness;
- violence;
- events related to drug addiction.

A parent's new partner entering the family system is another common stressful transition for children and young people. They may need additional support and understanding from parents and others at these times.

Each family will have its own unique and complex set of issues that they are dealing with at any one time. The effect of these factors on a young person needs to be considered in any intervention.

It is useful to talk about transition points in a young person's life, and in the life of their family. What events or incidents may have happened, or are happening, to the

family that may be impacting on a young person's current health and wellbeing?

What about the young person who is disconnected from family?

Some young people have long histories of disconnection from their family due to protective and other issues. Other people may be playing a caring role in their lives, or they may present to you with few or no connections.

All young people have been part of a family life span, whatever ‘family’ may mean to them, and are still part of their family's developmental pathway, even if they are not currently in contact. Young people can often appear indifferent when discussing family relationships. It is critically important to not underestimate the significance of past and present family relationships, whether or not they appear to play a role in the young person's current lifestyle.

Young people who appear to be the least well connected to family, and the least bothered by it, are often the ones most in need of the support that strong family or other adult relationships can offer.

Some questions to consider:

- Does the young person have other adults in their



Ideas from this Help Sheet

- A family life span or cycle includes a number of transition points, which may interact with a young person's developmental trajectory
- De-idealisation of parents occurs during adolescents, which may lead to conflict, change and dilemmas
- Changes in long-held roles will occur for both parents and adolescents, and parents are often under-prepared for such changes
- Workers can offer help for families by sharing their understanding of adolescent development.
- Young people who appear to be the least connected to family are often in need of the most support a family can offer. Talking to them about transitions and identifying other supportive adults, may help.

lives that can take on some of the emotional and psychological support needed at this time of their development (if family is absent or ineffective)? Professional support cannot replace a healthy relationship with a family member or a significant adult in their community.

- You may take on a significant support role in your work with young people. How can you play such a role whilst respecting and facilitating the role of the parent/s, family or carers in the young person's development?
- How can you encourage and facilitate attachment to a range of other adults, and hopefully family, for a young person, considering the brevity and function of your role?
- What new skills or information might a family or young person need to deal with a breakdown in family relationships? How can you help them?
- As a youth worker, you have a wealth of knowledge about adolescent development that can be a great source of support for a struggling parent – can you help parents to increase their knowledge base? How can you facilitate effective communication with parents or other family members?
- How can you increase the young person's understanding of the challenges that parents face at this stage, whilst acknowledging and respecting their own struggles?
- How can you increase the young person's understanding of a family's "unique events", or their developmental and situational transition points, that may be affecting their current situation?



Related Help Sheets

Worker Help Sheets

- Effective Assessment of Family Information at Intake
- Family Dynamics
- Role of Families in Adolescent Development
- Impact of family issues on Adolescents
- Simple Guide to Genograms
- Dealing with 'Black & White' Thinking

Parent Help Sheets

- Dealing with past traumas
- Building our Relationship
- When there is no relationship
- Setting boundaries



Suggested Reading

- Fuller, A. (1998) From Surviving to Thriving: Promoting Mental Health in Young People, ACER, Melbourne.
- Santrock, J. (1998) Adolescence, McGraw Hill, Boston.

