

Adolescent development between educational processes, linguistic mechanisms and psychosocial aspects

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Abstract: This article provides a critical review of the literature on psychosocial development in adolescence, a developmental period characterized by a complex interplay of biological, cognitive, and socio-relational transformations. Drawing on the clinical observations of Dr. Maria Anna Formisano, the essay explores the three pillars of adolescent development: identity construction, the renegotiation of social relationships with family and peers, and the architecture of protective factors that promote resilience. The analysis systematically integrates these observations with key theoretical models of developmental psychology, such as Erikson's epigenetic theory, Marcia's identity states, neurobiological models of risk-taking behavior, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Baumrind's typologies of parenting styles. Special attention is paid to the impact of the digital context on identity and relational construction. The final argument maintains that adolescence, despite being a phase of intrinsic vulnerability, represents a crucial opportunity for the development of lifelong skills, the outcome of which is modulated by the dynamic interaction between individual and contextual resources.

Keywords: Adolescence, Psychosocial Development, Identity Formation, Peer Pressure, Parenting Styles.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence, traditionally defined as the transition period between childhood and adulthood, represents one of the most studied and yet complex phases of the human life cycle. Historically labeled by G. Stanley Hall (1904) as a period of inevitable "Sturm und Drang" (storm and impetus), contemporary perspectives have partially mitigated this determinism, while still acknowledging the pervasiveness of the developmental challenges that characterize it. The profound and rapid transformations at the biological (pubertal maturation), cognitive (development of formal operational thinking), and psychosocial (search for autonomy and identity) levels require individuals to radically reorganize their self and their relational world (Santrock, 2021).

Dr. Maria Anna Formisano's (2023) reflections, although conveyed through popular channels, effectively capture the clinical phenomenology of this period, describing the subjective experience of adolescence as one of "fog" and existential confusion. This feeling of disorientation is not an anomaly, but the psychological

correlate of the primary developmental task: the construction of a stable and coherent identity. This paper aims to systematize these clinical insights within a scientific theoretical framework, adopting a biopsychosocial model to analyze the intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics that define the adolescent journey. The following will be examined in sequence: (1) the process of identity formation, (2) the role of the social context, with a focus on the peer group and the emerging digital arena, and (3) the influence of protective factors, primarily the role of family and caregivers, in promoting positive developmental outcomes.

2. Adolescent development between brain mechanisms and psychosocial processes

The psychological core of adolescence lies in the resolution of the fifth psychosocial crisis in Erik Erikson's (1968) model: Identity vs. Role Confusion. According to Erikson, the individual, supported by new cognitive capacities for abstraction, must integrate childhood identifications with his or her own inclinations, talents, and opportunities offered by the social context to forge a

sense of continuity of self over time. Failure in this task results in "role confusion," characterized by an inability to choose, apathy, and a sense of emptiness, which resonates with Formisano's (2023) description of "fog."

Building on Erikson's work, James Marcia (1966) operationalized the process of identity formation through two dimensions: exploration (the active evaluation of different identity alternatives) and commitment (the choice and adherence to specific roles and values). The interaction of these two dimensions defines four "identity states," which are not sequential stages but rather styles of managing identity conflict:

- 1. Diffused Identity:** Lack of both exploration and commitment. The adolescent appears apathetic, lacking a clear direction and easily influenced.
- 2. Identity Block (Foreclosure):** Present commitment but without a prior phase of exploration. The individual uncritically adopts values and roles defined by others, typically parents.
- 3. Moratorium:** A phase of active and intense exploration, but with vague or absent commitment. This is the state of true crisis, characterized by doubt and uncertainty, but functional for building a solid identity.
- 4. Identity Achieved:** The individual has arrived at a stable and consistent commitment after having gone through a significant exploration phase.

The "moratorium" corresponds to the period of greatest internal turmoil, but it is also the necessary prelude to achieving an authentic identity.

The ability to reflect on one's self in abstract terms is a cognitive achievement linked to the development of formal operational thinking described by Jean Piaget. This new ability allows adolescents to think about future possibilities, formulate hypotheses about who they might become, and evaluate the coherence between their value system and their behaviors. However, this cognitive progress also brings with it forms of egocentrism, as theorized by Elkind (1967), such as the "imaginary audience" (the feeling of being constantly observed and judged) and the "personal fairy tale" (the belief of being unique and invulnerable). These cognitive constructs amplify sensitivity to social judgment and can fuel both the search for identity and the anxiety associated with it (Steinberg, 2017).

Adolescence is marked by a progressive disinvestment from the family as the sole normative reference and a parallel, massive investment in the peer group. This shift is not a rupture, but a renegotiation aimed at gaining autonomy.

The peer group becomes a "social laboratory" in which adolescents experiment with new roles, receive feedback on their emerging identity, and develop complex relational skills (Brown & Larson, 2009). The need for belonging and acceptance is so powerful that it can generate strong pressure to conform. As Formisano (2023) notes, the adoption of risky behaviors, such as alcohol use, can be interpreted not only as a transgressive act, but as a ritual of affiliation aimed at overcoming inhibitions and cementing the bond with the group.

From a psychodynamic perspective, constructing a "mask," or False Self, as described by Donald Winnicott (1965), represents a

coping strategy to manage social pressure. An adaptive False Self allows one to navigate social conventions, but if it becomes rigid and pervasive, it leads to a disconnection from the True Self, resulting in feelings of emptiness and inauthenticity. The inability to "say no," mentioned by Formisano, is a clear indicator of a prevailing False Self, to the detriment of self-esteem and psychological well-being (Steinberg, 2017).

Neuroscientific research in recent decades has provided a biological explanation for adolescents' unique vulnerability to peer pressure and risky behavior. The adolescent brain is characterized by a maturational asymmetry: the limbic system (particularly the amygdala and nucleus accumbens), responsible for emotions and reward, matures more rapidly than the prefrontal cortex, responsible for impulse control, planning, and rational decision-making (Casey, 2015).

This neurobiological imbalance creates a window of vulnerability in which the attraction to novelty and immediate gratification (often social) prevails over a thoughtful assessment of long-term risks. The presence of peers acts as a powerful activator of the brain's reward system, making adolescents more likely to make risky choices in group settings than when alone.

The role of family remains crucial. Although adolescents seek autonomy, the need for a secure attachment bond does not disappear. The "secure base" function, theorized by John Bowlby (1988), transforms from a need for physical proximity to one of psychological availability. Adolescents need to know they can explore the world while being confident they can count on their family's support and acceptance in times of difficulty.

In this context, parenting style plays a crucial role. Diana Baumrind's (1971) research identified the authoritative style as the one most associated with positive outcomes. Authoritative parents combine a high level of emotional support and warmth (responsiveness) with a high level of control and clear expectations (demandingness). Unlike authoritarian parents (high control, low support) or permissive parents (low control, high support), authoritative parents promote autonomy and responsibility, while providing guidance and secure boundaries. This combination of warmth and control is the factor that best supports the development of assertiveness and strong self-esteem (Santrock, 2021).

3. The Role of Other Significant Adults

Beyond family, other adults can serve as crucial protective factors in adolescent development. Teachers, coaches, mentors, tutors, and community leaders can act as secondary attachment figures, providing positive role models, emotional support, guidance, and recognition outside the family context. Research indicates that the presence of at least one significant adult outside the family is among the strongest predictors of resilience in adolescents, particularly those facing challenging environments (Bowlby, 1988; Masten, 2014).

Supporting adolescents' development of authenticity and self-efficacy, as Formisano (2023) suggests, involves offering tools for emotional regulation, problem-solving, and coping with failure. Adults in mentoring roles can help adolescents navigate the fear of not being "enough," normalize mistakes as part of growth, and provide constructive feedback that strengthens self-esteem. This relational support can prevent the solidification of maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance, peer dependency, or rigid False Self behaviors (Winnicott, 1965; Steinberg, 2017).

Moreover, educational and community adults can facilitate adolescents' engagement in meaningful activities that promote skill development, social responsibility, and leadership. For example:

- Teachers can encourage collaborative projects and classroom discussions that cultivate reflection, perspective-taking, and empathy.
- Coaches and mentors can provide structured opportunities for goal-setting, resilience-building, and constructive risk-taking.
- Tutors and cultural facilitators can promote language, narrative, and storytelling skills, which are essential for self-expression and identity formation (McAdams, 2001; Bushi & Themeli, 2024).

The concept of the "educational community" thus extends beyond formal schooling to include any adult who provides consistent guidance, validation, and encouragement. These relationships offer a secure base from which adolescents can explore, experiment, and consolidate their identities, fostering both autonomy and connectedness. In the digital era, significant adults also play a role in guiding adolescents in navigating online spaces, helping them manage social pressures, cyberbullying, and the construction of online identities (Turkle, 2011).

In sum, the influence of other significant adults is multifaceted: they offer emotional support, cognitive scaffolding, social guidance, and opportunities for authentic self-expression. Integrating these adults into adolescents' lives strengthens protective networks, mitigates risk factors, and enhances the probability of achieving resilient and well-adjusted developmental outcomes.

4. The Educational and Linguistic Dimensions of Adolescent Development

Education constitutes one of the most influential social contexts in adolescence, offering not only academic instruction but also a formative environment for psychosocial growth. Within the school setting, adolescents learn to regulate emotions, cooperate with peers, and construct a sense of competence and purpose. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, learning occurs through social interaction and the internalization of cultural tools, primarily language. The classroom thus becomes a "zone of proximal development" in which the adolescent's cognitive and emotional capacities are shaped by communicative exchanges with teachers and peers. Beyond its cognitive function, education plays a regulatory and relational role: the quality of teacher-student relationships significantly influences motivation, self-efficacy, and resilience (Mercer, 2000).

Recent studies emphasize that educational motivation is a decisive factor in language acquisition and overall learner engagement. Bushi and Themeli (2024) highlight that intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors significantly affect adolescents' ability to develop foreign language competence, influencing not only academic performance but also self-confidence and cultural identity. Similarly, Bushi and Likaj (2021) underline the importance of key competencies—such as communication, critical thinking, and emotional awareness—as central to holistic learner development. These findings reinforce the view that education is not limited to the transmission of knowledge but represents a

multidimensional process that integrates emotional, linguistic, and cognitive growth.

Language, in particular, represents a central mechanism through which adolescents construct identity and negotiate belonging. The adolescent's linguistic repertoire—ranging from academic discourse to peer-group slang and digital communication—serves as a symbolic space for experimentation and self-definition. As McAdams (2001) notes, the act of narrating one's experiences fosters coherence in the self-concept, allowing young people to integrate past, present, and future aspects of their identity into a meaningful life story. Encouraging adolescents to verbalize emotions and personal reflections, whether through writing, discussion, or digital storytelling, enhances metacognitive awareness and emotional regulation, both of which are essential for adaptive psychosocial development.

From an educational standpoint, the promotion of emotional literacy—the ability to identify, express, and manage emotions through language—is a crucial protective factor. Programs that integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) within the curriculum have been shown to improve empathy, reduce impulsivity, and strengthen prefrontal control mechanisms involved in decision-making (Greenberg, Kusché, & Riggs, 2003). Furthermore, in multicultural and multilingual contexts, linguistic diversity adds both challenges and opportunities to the identity process. Bilingual adolescents, for instance, often display greater cognitive flexibility and intercultural competence, but may also face dilemmas of belonging and authenticity (Cummins, 2001). Supporting the use of multiple languages in educational and family environments fosters inclusivity and validates the plural dimensions of adolescent identity.

In conclusion, the educational and linguistic dimensions of adolescence are deeply intertwined with neural, cognitive, and psychosocial processes. Language not only mediates learning but also serves as the bridge between thought, emotion, and identity. Schools, therefore, have the dual responsibility of transmitting knowledge and cultivating communicative, emotional, and cultural competencies that prepare adolescents for authentic and resilient adulthood.

5. Conclusion and Implications for Intervention

In conclusion, a comprehensive scientific analysis of adolescence reveals a complex, multidimensional, and highly dynamic period of human development. Far from being merely a phase of crisis and conflict, adolescence represents a window of extraordinary potential, where foundational skills for lifelong health, well-being, and psychosocial competence are established. Clinical observations by Formisano (2023, 2025) on adolescents' creativity, passion, commitment, and socio-emotional sensitivity align with modern positive psychology approaches, emphasizing that this phase is not only a time of vulnerability but also an opportunity to cultivate resilience, emotional intelligence, and a strong sense of purpose.

The multidimensional nature of adolescence necessitates interventions at multiple levels, each tailored to address cognitive, emotional, social, and educational needs:

1. Clinical Level:

It is essential to provide adolescents with structured support in the process of identity exploration. Interventions should:

- Normalize feelings of doubt, uncertainty, and existential questioning as typical aspects of development.
- Teach adaptive coping strategies for managing social anxiety, peer pressure, and emotional dysregulation.
- Incorporate techniques from cognitive-behavioral therapy, narrative therapy, and mindfulness-based approaches, fostering self-reflection and emotional awareness.
- Recognize the role of digital spaces in adolescents' identity formation and provide guidance for safe, mindful engagement with online social environments.

2. Family Level:

The family remains a primary protective factor, and parenting strategies can significantly influence adolescent outcomes. Support interventions should:

- Promote authoritative parenting styles, combining warmth and emotional support with clear expectations and boundaries.
- Encourage open communication and active listening, enabling adolescents to discuss their experiences, doubts, and aspirations.
- Provide guidance to parents on monitoring digital activities, balancing autonomy with supervision, and validating the adolescent's emerging identity.
- Foster family-based activities that enhance emotional literacy, resilience, and problem-solving skills.

3. Educational and School Level:

Schools and educational contexts play a pivotal role in promoting cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development. Recommendations include:

- Designing curricula and extracurricular programs that foster identity exploration, emotional regulation, and social-emotional competencies.
- Providing adolescents with opportunities to articulate their thoughts and emotions through writing, dialogue, and creative projects, supporting both self-reflection and communication skills (McAdams, 2001; Bushi & Themeli, 2024).
- Ensuring the presence of at least one significant adult outside the family (teachers, mentors, coaches) who can provide guidance, recognition, and support, strengthening resilience in the face of challenges.
- Integrating multilingual and multicultural perspectives, encouraging adolescents to navigate diverse linguistic and cultural contexts while affirming their identity (Cummins, 2001; Bushi & Likaj, 2021).

4. Societal and Community Level:

While family and school are critical, community support networks—including youth organizations, clubs, and online safe spaces—can further enhance adolescents' development. These

contexts provide opportunities for experimentation, social learning, and the development of autonomy within structured, supportive frameworks.

Final Reflections

Understanding the interplay between neurobiological maturation, cognitive development, psychosocial growth, and environmental support is essential for transforming the vulnerabilities of adolescence into strengths. By addressing adolescents' developmental needs holistically—through supportive families, inclusive educational practices, mentorship, and targeted interventions—society can foster healthy, competent, and self-aware adults capable of navigating complex social, emotional, and cultural landscapes.

Adolescence is not merely a phase to endure; it is a crucial period for nurturing agency, creativity, and lifelong skills, laying the groundwork for resilience, well-being, and authentic self-expression. Interventions that consider the adolescent as a whole—biological, cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic—maximize the potential for positive outcomes across the lifespan.

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