



Explaining Social and Emotional Changes During Adolescence

This article was written by **Hilary Nobilo**, MMH (Perinatal and Infant), PGDipChAd, PGCComChH, and reviewed and updated by **Keryn O'Neill**, MA, PGCertEdPsych, Brainwave Knowledge Manager in 2024.

There are big changes going on in the lives of adolescents (taiohi). Not only physically, but also in their social and emotional development, as they move from being a tamaiti (child) to becoming an adult. Adolescent development is a dynamic process between the taiohi and their environment, with what is going on around them often also changing during this time.¹ This article looks at some of what we know about the social and emotional changes of adolescence.

Adolescent development is a dynamic process between the taiohi and their environment.



Individual differences

Although there are many common features of this stage of development, there are also large individual differences. Research tends to look at averages which can mask the large individual differences.² Whether we're thinking about the behaviour of taiohi, their brain development, or psychological development, taiohi are a diverse group whose trajectories vary significantly.³

Each taiohi experiences this time of growth uniquely, influenced by many factors that shape their individual paths, including their unique genetic makeup. Recognising these individual differences deepens our understanding of how adolescents navigate the complex challenges, and joys, of growth.

Brain changes

"The adolescent brain develops in a dynamic and integrative manner, calling on multiple brain systems and developmental processes to advance towards maturation."⁴ In other words, regions of the brain do not work in isolation; instead, it is many regions working together that lead to any particular behaviour.

Different areas of the brain develop and mature at different times.⁵ As our knowledge of these changes

grows through scientific understanding, so does our respect and appreciation for their significance.⁶

Two key changes are happening:

- their brains become more efficient as unused connections are pruned,
- myelination of axons helps the brain to send messages more quickly.⁷

Adolescence is a time of:

- heightened neural plasticity and
- increased sensitivity to social relationships.⁸

These things make this time of life a great opportunity to support the healthy development of taiohi, which in turn strongly influences their future wellbeing.

Developing an identity

Taiohi are forming a sense of who they are, who they want to be, what they need to do to get there and their place in the world. Taiohi shape and reshape their identity over this time.⁹ Changes in their brains mean they can increasingly think in more abstract ways.¹⁰ They can weigh up choices about future jobs and careers. They can explore their beliefs and morals; they may decide not to eat meat or may join a protest group to save the environment.

Taiohi have multiple aspects of their identity which can affect how they see themselves, as well as how others see them.



Some adolescents ‘try on’ different personalities.¹¹ They may experiment with how they look and how they behave. While this behaviour may seem false to adults, it can be a normal part of adolescent development. By about 18 years, most young people have a strong sense of who they are.¹²

Parents can support taiohi to form an identity by providing them with a sense of belonging and stability, a secure base from which they can explore their options and develop their values and beliefs.

Taiohi have multiple aspects of their identity which can affect how they see themselves, as well as how others see them. Sometimes, some of these aspects of identity can influence the opportunities or challenges they face. For example, taiohi who identify with one or more marginalised groups – perhaps due to their culture, gender, or sexuality – are more likely to face challenges than those who identify with more privileged groups.¹³ The need for adult acceptance and support for taiohi facing these challenges is particularly strong.

Their emotions

From puberty, taiohi may experience their feelings more strongly and may be more emotionally sensitive.¹⁴ Their highs may seem higher and their lows, lower. The way they react one day may be quite different to another day. They are still learning how to manage intense feelings and express themselves in mature ways. As the brain regions that control emotions mature, and they gain practice at managing ‘big feelings’, taiohi become more likely to step back and think before they respond to situations.¹⁵

Taiohi can be very self-conscious and highly sensitive to other people’s emotions and opinions.¹⁶ It becomes

very important to them to feel they belong and to feel accepted by their peers.¹⁷ They may sometimes think that their behaviour is the focus of everyone’s attention.¹⁸ They may be beside themselves with happiness or feel absolutely miserable as close friendships or romantic relationships come and go.¹⁹ This intensity of emotion usually lessens around mid-adolescence.

While the “thinking ability” of taiohi continues to mature, they are less able than adults to call on this consistently; when emotions are running high, it’s more difficult for taiohi to access rational thinking.²⁰ Like any complex skill, practice is needed.

While stronger emotions are to be expected at times during adolescence, if a young person’s reactions seem extreme, continue for a long time, or if whānau are concerned, it is important to seek help. Your doctor is a good place to start. The earlier the better as for some taiohi, their strong emotional reactions may indicate a need for support with their mental health.



**Parents and other adults
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Parents and other adults can provide support by helping taiohi find healthy ways to manage stress, and to process thoughts and feelings that may overwhelm them. For example, having enough sleep, regular physical activity, good nutrition, and avoiding alcohol and other drugs, all support the wellbeing and development of taiohi.²¹

Ability to see others' perspectives

As they go through adolescence, taiohi become much better at 'mentalising' i.e. understanding the perspectives of other people.²² They better appreciate the fact that the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of others may be different from their own.²³ Being able to 'put themselves in someone else's shoes' helps them as they begin to have more complex relationships.

Reading the emotions and social cues of others

Even from soon after birth, pēpi can read expressions of emotion on the faces of others. They get better at it as they grow. Taiohi learn to read and process more complex emotions and pick up on subtle non-verbal cues.²⁴ As they spend more time with their peers, it



helps to know what others think of them, and whether or not their peers are signalling approval and acceptance. If they sense they're not 'fitting in', they may change their behaviour to gain peer approval.²⁵ This desire for peer acceptance can be both positive and negative, depending on the situation and the values of the peer group they are part of.²⁶

Many adolescents begin to be romantically interested in others. Their increasing ability to read facial expressions of emotion and social cues may help them pick up on romantic interest directed towards them, such as a flirtatious look or may help them gauge the 'suitability' of a potential partner.²⁷

Context of taiohi development

All this change for taiohi is only part of the picture of adolescent development. Their environment, expectations and relationships are usually also changing and these all influence their social and emotional development. It's important to understand how interconnected an individual taiohi is with their environment.²⁸

There may be a change in school, a larger number of peers, and more time spent with peers.²⁹ They may be making choices about part-time work, learning to drive, and thinking about their future.

Development is happening whenever and wherever taiohi spend their time; with family, friends and teachers; at home, at school and all the other places they go. There are many opportunities to promote healthy social and emotional outcomes for all taiohi.

Importantly, what has happened earlier in a child's life influences the way taiohi navigate their adolescent years.³⁰ Their childhood relationships and

experiences, alongside their genes, have laid the foundations for their adolescent development to build on. If these have been largely positive and well-supported, they will be better placed to navigate adolescence in healthy ways. If they have not, they may need more support and understanding from the adults around them.

The role of adults

Loving and caring family relationships are important for the wellbeing of taiohi and support healthy adjustment.³¹ Parents continue to have a strong influence, although what this looks like changes.³² Taiohi still need advice and guidance from parents and other adults, as well as space to practise the new skills they're developing. "Adolescents crave relationships and connection to both peers and adults."³³

Understanding the changes that are typical of adolescent development help adults provide positive relationships and contexts that support healthy social and emotional development. Taiohi need positive and ongoing relationships with caring adults in their lives, both within and beyond their whānau.³⁴ Parents' behaviour towards their taiohi influences their emotional and brain development³⁵, even if it seems they only care what their friends think.

There are many opportunities to promote healthy social and emotional outcomes for all taiohi.





Conclusions

Adolescence is a time of exciting and challenging development for taiohi. While their bodies, brains and minds are undergoing transformation, the expectations of others and the opportunities of the world around them are changing rapidly too.

Social and emotional development are core aspects of this growth. This is influenced by many factors including the unique genetic makeup of taiohi, their childhood experiences, brain changes, and the supports and challenges of the environments and relationships around them.

Endnotes

1. Galván, 2021; Ferschmann, Bos, Herting, Mills, & Tamnes, 2022
2. Andrews et al., 2020
3. Foulkes & Blakemore, 2018; Galván, 2021
4. Galván, 2021, p.860
5. Somerville, 2016
6. Galván, 2021
7. Icenogle & Cauffman, 2021
8. Brody et al., 2019
9. Galván, 2021
10. Steinberg, 2016
11. Steinberg, 2016

12. Cote, 2009, cited by Steinberg, 2016
13. Roy et al., 2021
14. Kuther, 2017
15. Steinberg, 2016
16. Schriber & Guyer, 2016
17. Dahl & Suleiman, 2017
18. Choudhury et al., 2017
19. Steinberg, 2016
20. Schweizer et al., 2020, cited by Icenogle & Cauffman, 2021, p.1009
21. Belcher et al., 2021; Galván, 2020; Hosker, Elkins, & Potter, 2019
22. Kilford, Garrett, & Blakemore, 2016
23. Galván, 2021
24. Kragel et al., 2015
25. Steinberg, 2016
26. Hofmans & van den Bos, 2022
27. Motta-Mena & Scherf, 2016
28. Sameroff, 2010, cited by Ferschmann et al., 2022
29. Andrews, Ahmed, & Blakemore, 2020
30. Crosnoe, 2021
31. Crosnoe, 2021; Fenaughty, Sutcliffe, Fleming, et al., 2021
32. Galván, 2021
33. Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2020
34. Osher et al., 2020
35. Ratliff et al., 2021

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Glossary of Māori words:

pēpi – baby, infant

taiohi – young person, adolescent

tamaiti – child

tamariki – children

whānau – extended family

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